

Esquire

A full-page photograph of actor Bill Skarsgård. He is wearing a black sequined blazer over a white t-shirt with a red graphic. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. His hands are clasped in front of his chest. He is wearing a gold chain bracelet on his right wrist and a silver chain belt with a large ring and chain hanging down.

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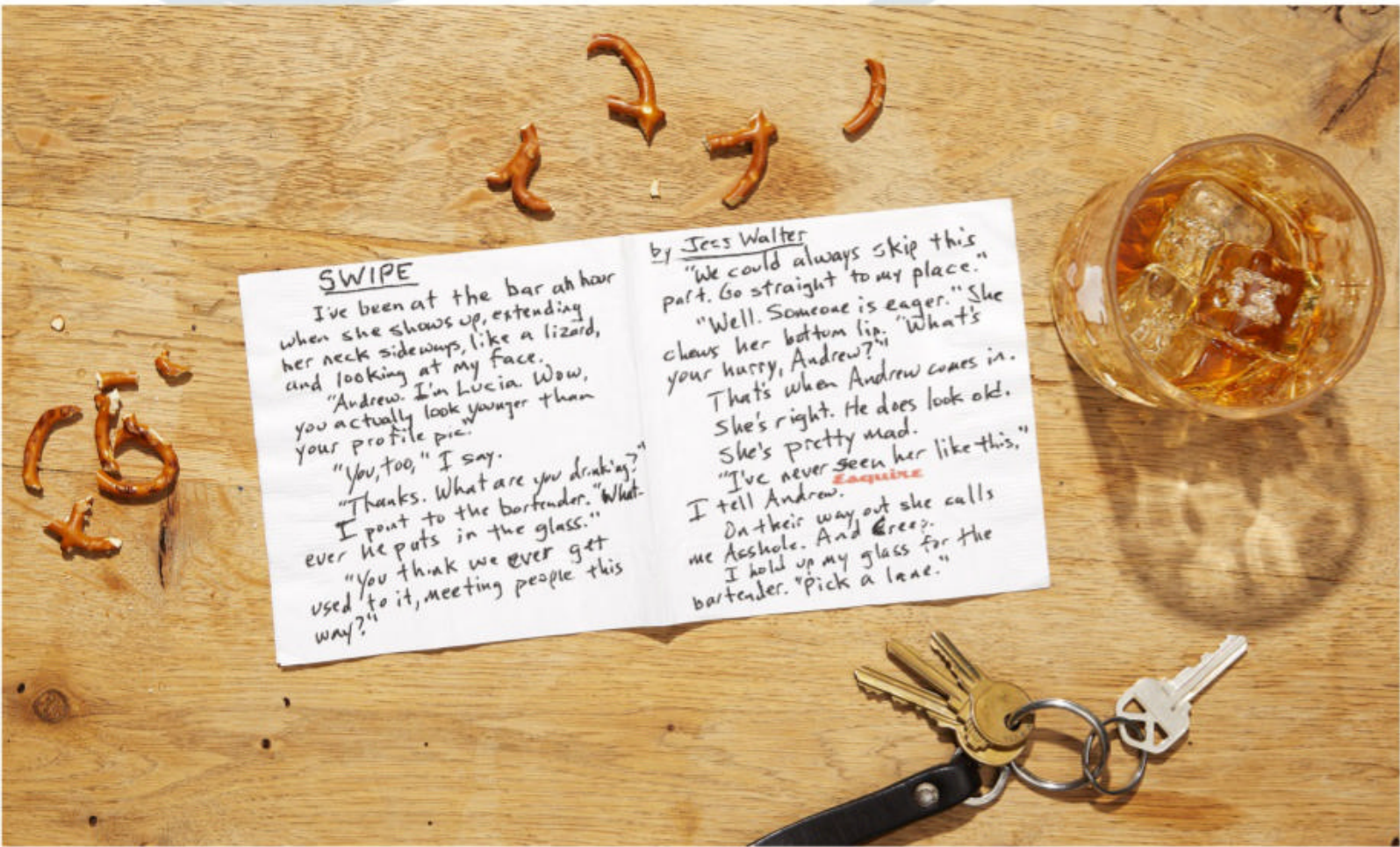
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ON ESQUIRE.COM RIGHT NOW: A DRINK AND A STORY

Through the Napkin Project, Esquire's long-running flash-fiction series, notable authors write short stories on cocktail napkins. This spring, we gave them a prompt: "Write a love story." Jess Walter responded with this sly barroom tale here. Log on to [Esquire.com](https://www.esquire.com) to read hundreds of napkin fiction stories, going all the way back to 2007.



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ON THE COVER

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PHILIP FRIEDMAN



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Written and directed by Wes Anderson.

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DAD-ISMS

Fathers love to distill life lessons into often-repeated sayings or mottoes. Sure, you got tired of hearing them, but in time you realized maybe the old man knew a thing or two. In the spirit of Father’s Day, we asked our staff to complete this sentence: As my dad always said, “_____.”

“It’s not the size of the man in the fight, it’s the size of the fight in the man.”

“Failure is the greatest motivation to succeed.”

“You can’t be a doormat unless you lie down.”

“The outcome doesn’t matter as long as the effort is there.”

“Suck it up!”

“Life is a marathon, not a sprint.”

“He couldn’t find his ass with both hands.”

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“Don’t underestimate people. Give them a chance to impress you.”

Not something he said but something he does. When my dad travels, he always wears a blazer. Quick flights. Long flights. Always in a blazer. Old-school working-class pride.

“The helmet only works if it’s on your head.”

“You can wish in one hand and crap in the other. See which one fills up first.”

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“If you can walk on it, it’s not broken.”



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Father Figures



BY LATE AFTERNOON AT CHURCHILL DOWNS, I'D LOST TRACK of the number of bourbon drinks I had consumed. There were icy mint juleps by the bucketload and more than a few Old Foresters on the rocks. I was feeling pretty damn good.

My wife, Sally, and I had left the kids with Grandma and Grandpa and traveled to Louisville for the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby. This was Oaks Day, the Friday before the Derby, during which the guests wear pink for the main event: the running of the three-year-old fillies (in other words, young-girl horses). It was our first time at the Derby, only my third time at a horse track, and none of our bets had paid off yet.

As guests of Longines, the official timekeeper of the Derby, we got to join the CEO and watch the Oaks from a grassy area right next to the track. That required crossing the dirt raceway. It had been raining on and off all day, so the track was sopping-wet mud. My wife took off her high heels and walked barefoot. I decided to brave it in my loafers, which became caked in mud and horse shit. I'm not sure a cobbler can ever restore them, and I'm not sure I care. That's historic mud and shit right there! And the thrill of feeling the fillies pound right past us and hearing the hundred thousand spectators roar more than made up for one ruined pair of shoes. It's now a core memory.

I never take these types of experiences for granted. But they often mean leaving my two daughters for stretches of time. I haven't celebrated a Father's Day at home in five years, because Men's Fashion Week in Milan always falls in the middle of June. So I always spend part of that day reading Esquire.com, which has a trove of stories about fatherhood. My favorite is an essay by Tom Bissell about raising daughters. "To raise a son

is to teach him how to master his world while knowing he'll get hurt," Bissell writes. "Raising a daughter can and should be about that, too, with the added trick of making her aware that the world will seek to hurt her in far subtler ways. The little boy's mastery will be applauded, but the little girl's mastery will often be resisted." I think about this line at least once a day while parenting my two girls.

In the summer issue of Esquire, we have a fun, irreverent package starting on page 27 about how to be a dad—not *a father*. My contribution is a short piece about the unexpected joy of becoming *my father*. Whether he knows it or not, my dad has given me a map for life—as both a father and a man. But he's not the only father figure in my life. My older brother has filled that role. So have uncles, teachers, coaches, bosses, and my late father-in-law, John. My mom, too. You don't have to have a Y chromosome, or be a father, to help bring up a man.

On our last night in Louisville, I was reminded of another father figure in my life. Late in the evening after the Derby, Sally and I decided to have a nightcap at the hotel bar. I wanted one last taste of Kentucky bourbon, and my eyes landed on a Manhattan, which I hadn't had in years. Soon I got down to the bottom of my drink, where the cherry awaited. I popped it in my mouth, and the bourbon-soaked sweetness unleashed a powerful memory. My grandfather, my dad's dad, drank Manhattans at home. And when I was a boy, he'd let me eat the cherries from the bottom of his glass. As an eight-year-old, I must have caught a nice buzz. He's been dead nearly twenty-five years, but the taste of that cherry in a Louisville hotel bar brought me right back to his kitchen. —Michael Sebastian

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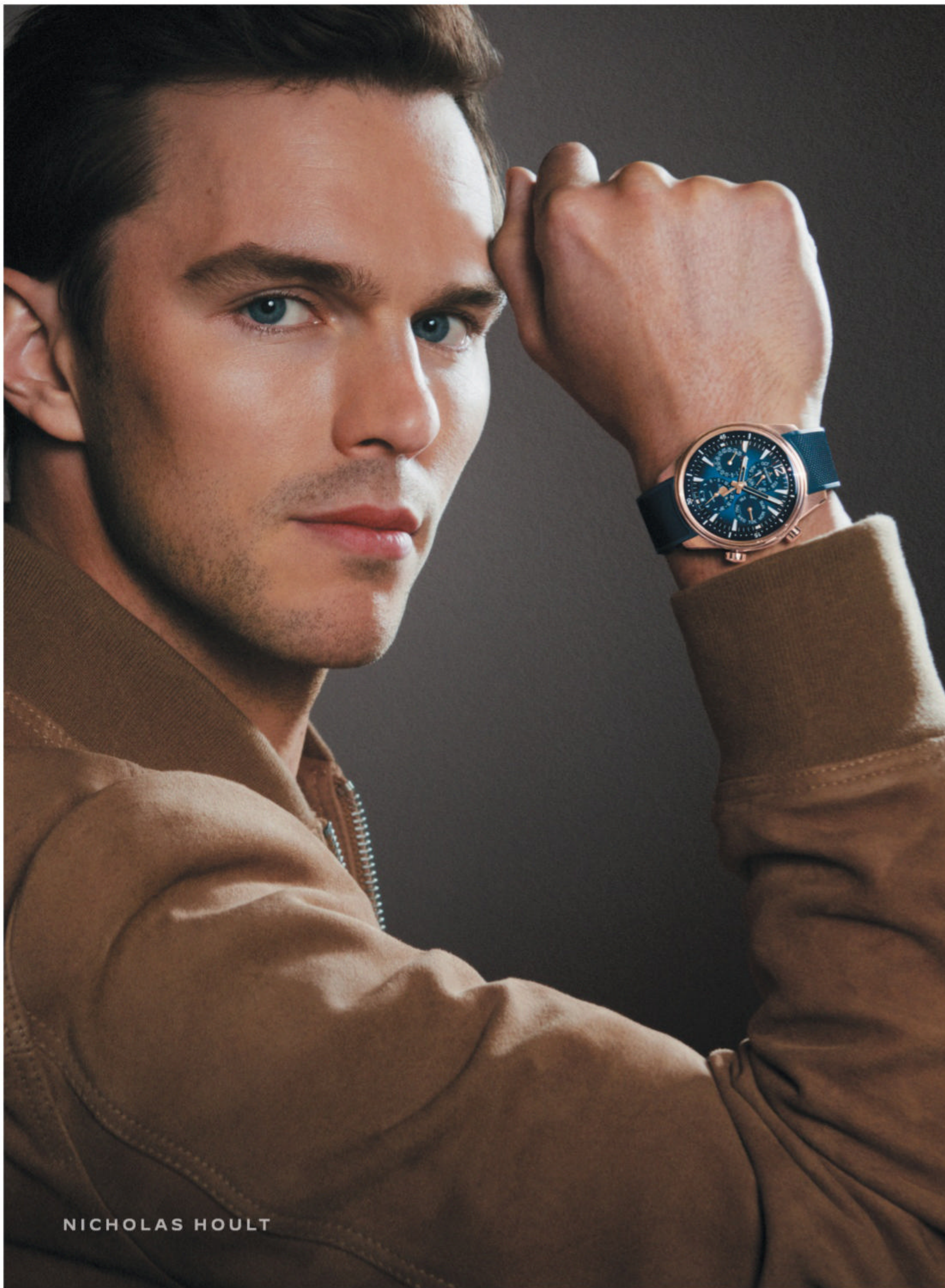
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01



02

03

04



05

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Summer '24

ANDER MONSON (01) is a wuss. (Self-proclaimed! Esquire, Summer issue.) That only amplified his curiosity about the emerging sport of professional slap fighting, in which, yes, two men take turns slapping each other in the face as hard as they can. In our feature story on the subject on page 94, the author and poet travels to two slap-fighting events, in Las Vegas and Oklahoma City, to witness the action himself and talk to some key players, including SlapFIGHT Championship CEO JT Tilley, the godfather of pro slap fighting. Monson is the author of nine books and the editor of the magazine *Diagram*, and teaches writing at the University of Arizona.

DAVE HOLMES (02) is not embarrassed to admit that he's a wellness asshole now. In his column on page 16, he regrets to inform you that all the cold-plunging and microdosing and biohacking that the influencers are touting actually works. A longtime Esquire editor at large, the writer, performer, podcast host, and former MTV VJ wrote our most recent digital cover story, on comedian Jerrod Carmichael, and has a delightful and popular new podcast out now called *Who Killed the Video Star? The Story of MTV*.

KRISTA JONES (03) knows what you're buying before you do. As Esquire's commerce director, Jones is a brand encyclopedia and Dyson expert, and she's probably tested out more mattresses than you'll ever sleep on in your entire life. In our special package on fatherhood, on page 27, she runs down the items that every dad needs in his arsenal. Jones is currently expecting her first child, and

her best advice for soon-to-be dads is to do their own homework.

"Your pregnant wife doesn't have to do all the research, you know? Do it yourself. Is it nontoxic? How easily does this stroller fold up? If you're buying something, you need to do due diligence."

Photographer and director **GUY AROCH (04)** returns to the pages of Esquire this summer with photos of Ewan Mitchell and Tom Glynn-Carney, the stars of HBO's *House of the Dragon*, which run alongside an interview with them, starting on page 72. Over the course of his career, his photographs have been featured in magazines including *Interview*, *British Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar* Taiwan, as well as in work for brands such as Coca-Cola, Hugo Boss, Gucci, Disney, and Adidas, to name a few. He has photographed celebrities like Ryan Reynolds, Jessica Chastain, and Brad Pitt, and was also responsible for Esquire's April/May 2022 cover shoot starring Oscar Isaac... including, yes, that viral photo of Isaac spitting water.

Everyone within the pages of this magazine looks sharp. Tailored, steamed clothes, in the right sizes, with the right accessories, in shoes that fit. That's in no small part thanks to Esquire's fashion assistant, **ANDREA RIOS (05)**, who makes sure every garment is where it needs to be, when it needs to be, whether that's on Aaron Taylor-Johnson at Bannerman Castle in upstate New York or on Bill Skarsgård for the cover story for this issue (page 58). Her number-one styling tip at the moment? Don't neglect the socks. "I love a sparkly or sheer sock for a man. It adds some intrigue."



EASY PREP EASY GRILL EASY CLEAN



blueprint

_ YOUR GUIDE TO A LIFE WELL LIVED

I Am a Wellness Asshole Now

The only thing more excruciating than soaking in a tub of freezing-cold water is telling people it actually works. BY DAVE HOLMES

TO BE A MIDDLE-AGED MAN IN SOUTHERN California is to find yourself saying, with alarming frequency, “Yeah, I’m one of *those* assholes now.” If you’ve come from somewhere else—somewhere more *corn-fed* and *homespun* and other synonyms for *unhealthy*—you may adopt a wholesome habit out here. You may reap physical and emotional benefits, and you *will* be clowned to death by your friends from home. CrossFit, breath work, bull-shitting through a gratitude journal—I’ve tried them all. Some have had a positive impact on my life; others have given me items to sell on OfferUp. (I’m looking at you, matcha stirring bowl.)

This year has been especially busy on the humilatingly-healthy-habits front. Maybe it’s a post-Covid focus on fitness, or a more robust wellness marketplace, or the fact that I hit my 50s and need to get that shit started now if I want to live forever. Whatever the reason, 2024 has been a boom time for people who want to sell wellness stuff to Dave Holmes, and the truth is that a lot of it works. Here’s an incomplete list of the kinds of assholes I am now.

THE COLD-PLUNGE ASSHOLE

You’ve seen this on Instagram: some hot, smiling person submerged in ice-cold water, telling you how painful yet invigorating it is. Hello, I’m one of those assholes now. I acquired a cold-plunge tub from a company called Plunge—immersion in cold water does not enhance your creative-naming skills. For 30 days and counting, I have voluntarily iced myself in it, and the only thing more excruciating is telling you I love it. My energy level is higher, my moods more stable, my skin tighter, and my neighbors get to hear me make an unpleasant gasping noise as I throw my body in each morning.

Like so much that is good for you, a cold plunge is agony at first. You are, after all, participating in an activity from which your body will reflexively recoil (opposite but equal to putting a hand on a

hot stove). You lose your breath, you shiver, you think, *Wellness influencers, now you’re just making shit up*. But then your body begins to warm itself up. You feel a light euphoria. Your breathing slows. Yes, these are all symptoms of mild hypothermia, but so what? Think back to when Leonardo DiCaprio let go of that door in *Titanic*. Wasn’t his skin glowing? Didn’t you walk out of the multiplex feeling great about his inflammation level?

I’m a believer, so much so that I’ve invited my neighbors and friends: *Come jump in this thing anytime*. They have stopped returning my texts.

THE MICRODOSING ASSHOLE

This year, I also started popping a 0.25mg gummy of psilocybin, the active ingredient in what programs like D.A.R.E. used to call magic mushrooms. Microdosing is popular with the world’s most tire-some tech bros, and I’ve tried it on and off for a few years. I used to buy capsules from the shroom distributor Some Guy My Friend Knows, which would mail them from Brooklyn once a month in

AFTER MICRODOSING, there is just a **MILD CHILL** and a slight reduction in my tendency to get in my own **GODDAMN WAY**. It’s like if Whole Foods made Lexapro.

an empty Whitney Houston or Michael Bolton cassette case, to throw off the authorities and because my guy had a flair for presentation.

Now my gummies come from a company called Psilouette—mushrooms *do* enhance your creative-naming skills—so they feel more official and less potentially scary. I microdose most mornings, and I’m afraid the tech bros are correct. There’s no druggy feeling; I see no fractals; the sky doesn’t inhale and exhale with me. (Fine, I once acciden-

tally took a gummy 30 minutes after I’d already taken one, which had a side effect of sending me out to my backyard to feel the sun on my face and listen to the first three R.E.M. albums in order.) There is just a mild chill and a slight reduction in my tendency to get in my own goddamn way. It’s like if Whole Foods made Lexapro.

THE PEPTIDES AND NAD+ ASSHOLE

After a certain age, American men are known to worry about their testosterone level, and that age is birth. Accordingly, a number of companies geared toward keeping us T’d up have entered the men’s telehealth marketplace. My favorite is a hormone-optimization company called Blokes; it sends a phlebotomist to your house to collect your blood, which is then run through a million tests to determine which hormones are, I guess, *pessimized*. In my consultation Zoom, Blokes’ resident doctor told me my testosterone level is actually pretty high for a guy my age, a piece of news I reacted to by immediately writing it in this column. But there was still room for improvement; he suggested a peptide called sermorelin to stimulate my pituitary gland, plus regular injections of NAD+ to aid in the formation of . . . something in my cells. I don’t really remember, because I was using most of my brainpower to be psyched about the testosterone. You’ll notice how much more clearly I’m thinking when I pull you aside to share my T-level story.

So I am here to tell you the health claims about these mildly embarrassing pursuits are mostly true. The benefits they promise—better sleep, lower cor-

tisol levels due to reduced stress, higher energy, and more-positive moods—are real. But so is this: These benefits, and so many more, can be achieved by simply not drinking alcohol, something this election season will make it nearly impossible to do. I’m sticking myself with a needle weekly now. I wake up more refreshed, my brain is less foggy, and I’m much harder to run away from at parties.

But what do I know? I’m not a doctor. I’m just a guy whose T level is actually pretty high. 🍷





TREATING EVERY GAME LIKE HIS FIRST.
GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO WEARS THE NAVITIMER.



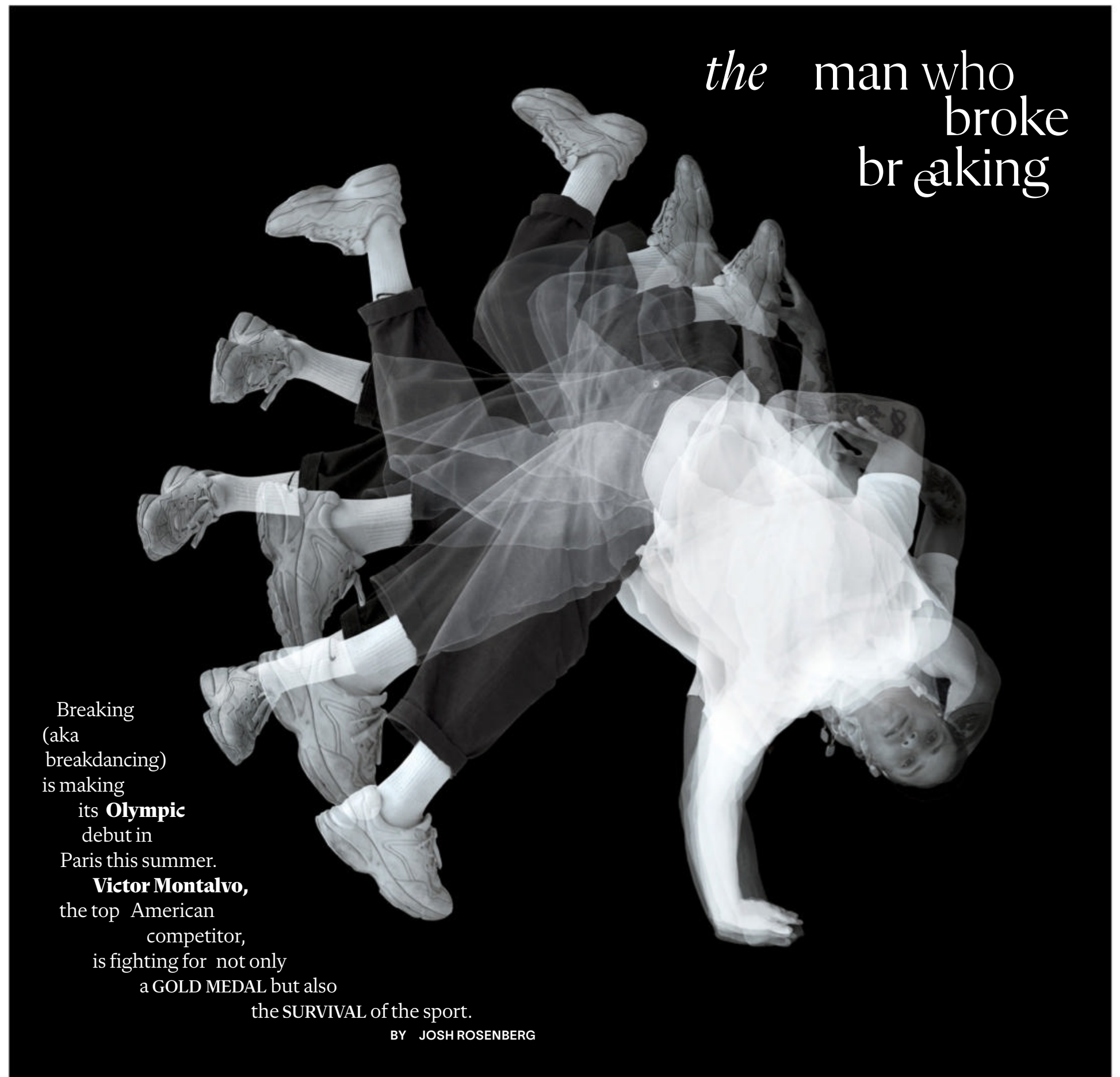
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the man who broke breaking

Breaking (aka breakdancing) is making its **Olympic** debut in Paris this summer. **Victor Montalvo**, the top American competitor, is fighting for not only a GOLD MEDAL but also the SURVIVAL of the sport.

BY JOSH ROSENBERG

WHEN VICTOR MONTALVO'S SHOULDERS HIT THE FLOOR, THEY glide. He's a whirlpool, spinning round and round, pulling you closer with every impossible rotation. If you didn't know better, you'd think the floor—not Victor—was revolving. He pivots from his back to standing on his head to a full 360 degree spin on the palm of his left hand.

This is the world-champion breaker's signature move: the Super Montalvo.

It's cheeky, cocky, and a downright nuclear weapon that has made Montalvo the face of breaking (or breakdancing—the sport has enjoyed a rebrand

since you originally watched *You Got Served*). In August, the 30-year-old will represent Team USA at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris.

"I honestly don't have rivals," Montalvo tells me in a video interview a few months before he takes the global stage. And there's not a hint of ego in his voice. The man hardly blinks, and his head is perpetually tilted ever so slightly to the side, sizing me up as if I were his next opponent. Pity the poor schmucks who have to face him in the Olympics.

Montalvo has earned his unmitigated confidence. In his career, he's won every major international breaking competition in the world. He is the reign-

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ing gold medalist at the World Games, a two-time champion of Red Bull BC One, and the most recent winner of the WDSF World Breaking Championship. Quite simply, he broke breaking. After a while, though, even winning felt repetitive. Montalvo lost the love of the sport... but that didn't last long. "I already did everything I wanted to do in my breaking career," he says. "I just got bored of it. It felt like a never-ending cycle. Same events each year, every year. Like, man, I want something new."

When Montalvo heard that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had added breaking to the slate, his passion was instantly reinvigorated. Another mountain to climb. Another nation to conquer. He remembers thinking, *Perfect. That's another goal I can achieve.* His chances of taking home the gold medal are extremely good. David "Kid David" Schreiber, a breaking legend and Red Bull commentator, recently told *Rolling Stone*, "[There's not] another competitive breaker who is as consistent and has the full package." Montalvo blends the Tasmanian Devil's unhinged energy with Allen Iverson's creativity. But for all of his aplomb, a win in Paris would mean more than just another hearty chuckle from his throne. He's fighting for the survival of the sport itself.

Breaking is a little different today from what it was in its '80s heyday. B-boys no longer crowd the street corners of the Bronx, where the sport originated. In the early aughts, Red Bull provided an upgrade by organizing a competition among eight elite crews, who were fighting for a \$4,000 grand prize. That paved the way for the global BC One event that Montalvo has won twice. Now the energy-drink company sponsors him. Modern contests feature one-on-one battles on a dance floor—with each breaker taking roughly one-minute turns, trying to outperform their opponent. As in rhythmic gymnastics and figure skating, judges score their performances and announce a winner. In Paris, Montalvo will compete against 15 other international B-boys, all likely just as revved up as him. "It's new, evolved, refreshed, and refined. I just can't wait to showcase it at the Olympics," Montalvo says of his sport. "They thought it was stuck in the '80s. Hopefully we'll change that."

At the 2024 Olympics, breaking will be featured alongside surfing, sport climbing, and skateboarding—four events that IOC president Thomas Bach hopes will bring in Gen Z viewers. Still, breaking is only a guest in Paris. It won't appear in the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles—the IOC made the decision before Montalvo could showcase his talents this summer. But if anyone can capitalize on this opportunity to convince the IOC to bring breaking to the 2032 Brisbane Olympics, Montalvo believes it's him. Serving as an ambassador for his sport is a calling. "This is something that I never would've thought I would be, but I have to," he says.

Breaking is in Montalvo's DNA. In the '80s, his father and uncle, Victor and Hector Bermudez, were big-time B-boys. The Bermudez twins helped popularize the dance

trend throughout Mexico, performing across the country before giving it up and moving to the United States. Back then, you couldn't make much money in the breaking world.

For Montalvo, it's a whole new ball game. When he was just six years old, his father pointed at the screen as the family watched the breaking film *Beat Street* and said, "Look, I used to do this back in the day." Montalvo burst out laughing. Bermudez wasn't joking; he put on a hoodie and started "busting out head spins and windmills," Montalvo recalls. "We thought, *Wow, this is amazing.*"

As the story goes, Montalvo and his cousin, who goes by Static, joined a crew in Kissimmee, Florida, at a time



Montalvo first found breaking-world success in 2011, conquering a Red Bull cypher event in St. Petersburg, Florida. He was just 17 years old.

when breakdancing was big in the state. "I would sneak out of my house to go to different events around Florida, sometimes out of state, and [my father] would let me get away with that because I was doing something positive," Montalvo remembers. "My dad was always on the sidelines. He supported me 100 percent. He tells me all the time, 'I'm living my dreams through you.'"

The Olympics is an event in which tradition meets innovation, and according to Montalvo, that's exactly what sets him apart from the competition. "I love keeping the tradition of breaking alive," he says. "Your body is the instrument, and you're bringing that instrument out." He adds, "I love seeing people's faces after they watch me dance. Like, *God, this is so incredible.*"

Speaking to Montalvo, you can tell that standing still is a burden. It's easier for him to spin—to point his feet to the sky, stopping only to taunt his opponents with picture-perfect freezes. At the moment, he's all smiles. More often, he's smirking. "I understand the formula now," Montalvo says of the road ahead. "Beat the system." ■

VICTOR MONTALVO'S FAVORITE BREAKING MOVIES

Three classics of the genre to watch before the sport's Olympic throw-down



STYLE WARS (1983)

"*Style Wars* is a graffiti documentary, but it's really dope because it talks about the culture of breaking and just hip-hop in general."



THE FRESHEST KIDS: A HISTORY OF THE B-BOY (2002)

"*The Freshest Kids* is a documentary about the origins of breaking and what it means to be a breaker. Hopefully, after the Olympics, they'll have a little breaking documentary. We need a new one for this day and age."



WILD STYLE (1983)

"*That's a movie,*" Montalvo says about the hip-hop film starring the famous Rock Steady Crew. "Watch that one."

“Dumb” Tech Strikes Back

Fed up with the tyranny of smartphone life, more people are embracing turn-of-the-millennium technology. Here are the best gadgets for those ready to get retro.

BY LUKE GUILLORY

WHILE HANGING OUT WITH FRIENDS ON A recent visit home to Atlanta, I mentioned casually that I was “dumbphone curious.” To my surprise, one tech-obsessed pal—she’s employed by a Web3 art collective and gets paid in cryptocurrency—quickly said the same. Then two others pulled out matching flip phones that looked very 2004. A group of terminally online Gen Zers talking about going back to a technology we barely remember? It couldn’t be a coincidence.

Turns out, my friends and I are part of a growing movement to embrace less-than-smart media. Call it streaming fatigue. Or maybe it’s just a longing for a simpler time. But people are choosing to ditch their \$1,000 smartphones—and the hours of mindless scrolling—for more intentional media consumption. And consumer electronics companies are responding by rewinding to 2000s-style gadgets. These products aren’t fully dumb, more like almost-analog. I tested a bunch and found four retro devices that stood above the rest.

01_Panasonic Blu-ray Player: You’re paying how much a month for Hulu, Netflix, and Max? Not us. We’re watching weird director’s cuts with no commercials—for just \$2.99 per disc on eBay. This 4K Blu-ray player has multiple video playback options, high-res audio, voice assist, and just the right amount of old-meets-new. **\$250**

02_Nokia 2780 Flip: Take calls, send simple texts, and snap low-resolution pictures with this Nokia flip-phone remake—then snap it closed without ever getting sucked into TikTok. **\$90**

03_Leica SOFORT 2: This half-digital, half-Polaroid-style point-and-shoot makes it easy to share photos to your phone via Bluetooth if you need to put them on Instagram. Or, even better, print an actual picture and give it to a friend. **\$389**

04_Sony Walkman: Sony updated its Walkman line in 2023 with this sleek device. Buy a digital album from your favorite band, load up your MP3 or WAV files, listen with wired headphones or Bluetooth, and look fucking cool doing it. **\$350**



PURE AND SIMPLE: THE LIGHT PHONE II

If you’re burned-out on your smartphone but not eager to return to the clamshell era, there is a third way. Consider the Light Phone II, a tiny, featherlight brick with an electronic-paper touch screen. Created by a Brooklyn start-up, the first Light Phone shipped in 2017 as a true dumbphone: call-only. The Light Phone II debuted in 2019 with the ability to call, text, and serve as a personal hotspot. What it doesn’t have? A web browser, social apps, email, or blue light. Think of it as Zen in the palm of your hand. **\$299; thelightphone.com**

PROP STYLING: SHANE KLEIN

“Doing something new.
That’s the adventure.”

— Adventurer, Naomi Uemura

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BETTER OFF DAD

Every man
is afraid of
becoming
his father.
There's a
better way.
We'll show
you.



SCIENTIFIC FACT: NO ONE HAS EVER SMILED WHILE saying the word *father*. Bowed their head in respect or fear? For sure. Followed it with the word *figure*? You know it. Included it in the title of their “brave and unsparing” memoir? You betcha. Magazines (this one included!) love nothing more than to furrow their brow and devote pages upon pages to the state of American fatherhood. It’s no wonder, with a word—a figure—so looming that every man, on some level, fears turning into his father. ¶ Becoming a father is serious business. Unless you work at the White House or are a surgeon of some kind, raising a kid is likely the most important thing you’ll ever do. The stakes are high enough to make a guy wonder whether he should be a father at

all. ¶ Our radical suggestion? Don’t do it. Don’t become a father. Become a dad instead. ¶ You know the difference in your bones. A dad knows the name of the teacher, the best friend, and the kid who smells weird. A dad apologizes when he’s wrong and does finger guns when he’s right. He can tell you which sweatshirt is the itchy one. He does the voices when he reads from *The Berenstain Bears* and can name at least a couple members of BTS. ¶ A dad makes his kids feel good, like someone in this tough world actually wants to be around them. But how to become a dad? We asked some dads we know for a few tips. You didn’t ask? Guess there’s one thing dads and fathers have in common after all: They love to give unsolicited advice. Here’s ours.

BUT FIRST, A QUIZ!

ARE YOU *a* DAD *or a* FATHER?

HOW OFTEN DO YOU START A SENTENCE WITH THE WORDS “WHY, WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE. . .”?

- A_ Almost never. (10)
- B_ Occasionally. (7)
- C_ At least once a week. (5)
- D_ It’s the title of my podcast. (0)

YOUR CHILD IS PLAYING ON A YOUTH SPORTS TEAM. YOU:

- A_ Stress sportsmanship, healthy competition, and the value of bringing enough orange slices to share. (10)
- B_ Track team standings in a suspiciously thick binder. (7)
- C_ Conduct frank postgame assessments of your child’s play. You try not to be harsh, but there have been tears. (3)
- D_ Remind your child, “It’s not a foul if the ref doesn’t see it.” (0)

HOW DO YOU HELP YOUR CHILD WITH HOMEWORK?

- A_ You work side by side, patiently guiding them to arrive at the right answers themselves. (10)
- B_ You do a nighttime run to the drugstore for poster board—but no more than once a semester. (7)
- C_ You take one look at the worksheet and panic. (4)
- D_ Are they getting homework already? (0)

YOUR CHILD IS ABOUT TO RECEIVE A “PARTICIPATION TROPHY.” YOU:

- A_ Congratulate them! Showing up is an achievement, too. (10)
- B_ Encourage your child to accept the trophy graciously, then throw it away in a couple weeks. (5)
- C_ Post a Facebook screed about kids today, participation trophies, and the goddamn mercy rule. (0)

YOU IMPART LIFE LESSONS BY:

- A_ Making every effort to set a strong example; the surest way to give instruction is to model good behavior. (10)
- B_ Buying your kid a subscription to Esquire. (7)
- C_ Buying your kid a subscription to Foreign Affairs. (0)

YOUR CHILD IS HELPING YOU FIX A LEAKY KITCHEN FAUCET WHEN, OUT OF FRUSTRATION, YOU SLAM DOWN A HEAVY WRENCH, SERIOUSLY MARRING THE COUNTERTOP. YOU:

- A_ Collect yourself, apologize for losing your temper, and explain that we all make mistakes but that it’s important to own up to them and try to do better. (10)
- B_ Let a few choice curses fly but then sheepishly say you’re sorry. (5)
- C_ Blame your wife for insisting on that polished granite countertop. That ugly green slab cost a fortune! (–5)

HOW TO TELL A DAD JOKE

INTERVIEW BY JOSH ROSENBERG



Dad jokes only seem easy. We asked Jim Gaffigan, comedian, father of five, and founder of *Fathertime Bourbon*, to break down the art form for us.

WHAT MAKES A PERFECT DAD JOKE?

It has to be a bad joke. The most important thing is the fact that the joke is annoying to our children. A key element is we pretend to be unaware that it’s a groaner.

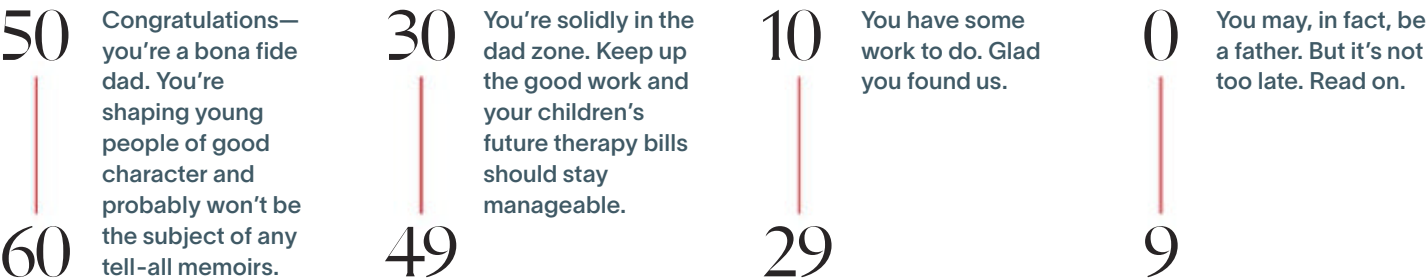
DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE?

There are some classics. “I’m hungry.” “Hi, hungry, I’m Dad.” It has to be an observation on a very lazy connection of two seemingly unrelated ideas.

WHY DO YOU THINK DADS GRAVITATE TOWARD PUNS?

Kids are dumb, so they’re not going to get it initially. But as they get older, it becomes a joke that is shared. It’s probably the most effective modern tool for communicating sarcasm that we have as human beings.

WELL, FATHER OR DAD? Tally your responses and see below.





IS IT OKAY TO HAVE *a* FAVORITE KID?

It's more than okay; it's the only way. Take it from Deion Sanders.

BY BRADY LANGMANN

DEION SANDERS MIGHT BE BETTER AT TOSSING BONDS than at coaching football. The grizzled, never-not-controversial head coach of the University of Colorado Buffaloes is full of them. There's "If your dream ain't bigger than you, there's a problem with your dream." Or "I'm married to football; baseball is my girlfriend." One more? "Confidence is my natural odor." Fans eat up his sound bites like Ralphie the Buffalo devours a bushel of grass at halftime.

Then, on numerous occasions (including Father's Day!) last year, Sanders ranked his five children: Deion Jr., Shelomi, Shilo, Shedeur, and Deiondra. Before you howl—he didn't rank his babies the same way each time. When journalists, in disbelief, followed up, he doubled down, saying, "I'm the only one that's honest about ranking my kids. You guys act like you all love them the same, and you don't." (Sanders, uh, declined to comment.)

Here's the thing: Coach Prime is right. This sounds like a very big-*F* Father move, but it's really a classic Dad move. Everyone has a favorite child. You have a favorite child. As in the Sanders household, your favorite probably changes with the various kids' wins and losses. Today, the one who had to be told only once to put on his shoes is most likely ranking ahead of the one who made you late for work with a meltdown about why the banana wasn't *yellow* yellow. Why not be like Prime Time and just admit it? When I'm a father of five (Brady Jr., Furiosa, Peggy, Elvis, and Steve), you know damn well I'll keep my rankings on a whiteboard stuck to the fridge. Love you, Brady Jr.!

The Gear You Need to Level Up Your Dadding

BY KRISTA JONES

Diaper? Done. Snacks? Packed. Wisdom? Imparted. What further proof do you need that you're a dad? We recommend three items that will guarantee your status.



A PORTABLE PROJECTOR

Congrats on finally making it to the "fun" years. From, let's say, age seven to the dreaded start of teendom, how do you keep the kids interested in hanging out with you? Movie night, and do it right—with a portable projector. Pick it up by the handle, then watch the movie out back or in the kids' room. \$1,300



DAD SNEAKERS

Don't forget you need to look the part. Nothing says "dad," let alone "cool dad," more than the Made in USA 990's. \$200



SNOO

The best, most valuable—and even most controversial—topic concerning items for newborns is the Snoo. It's a bassinet invented by Dr. Harvey Karp, a childhood-development expert, and it's controversial mostly because of its price tag. Even if you don't buy the Snoo, you'd better have an opinion on the Snoo, stat. \$1,695

GIVE IT A SHOT

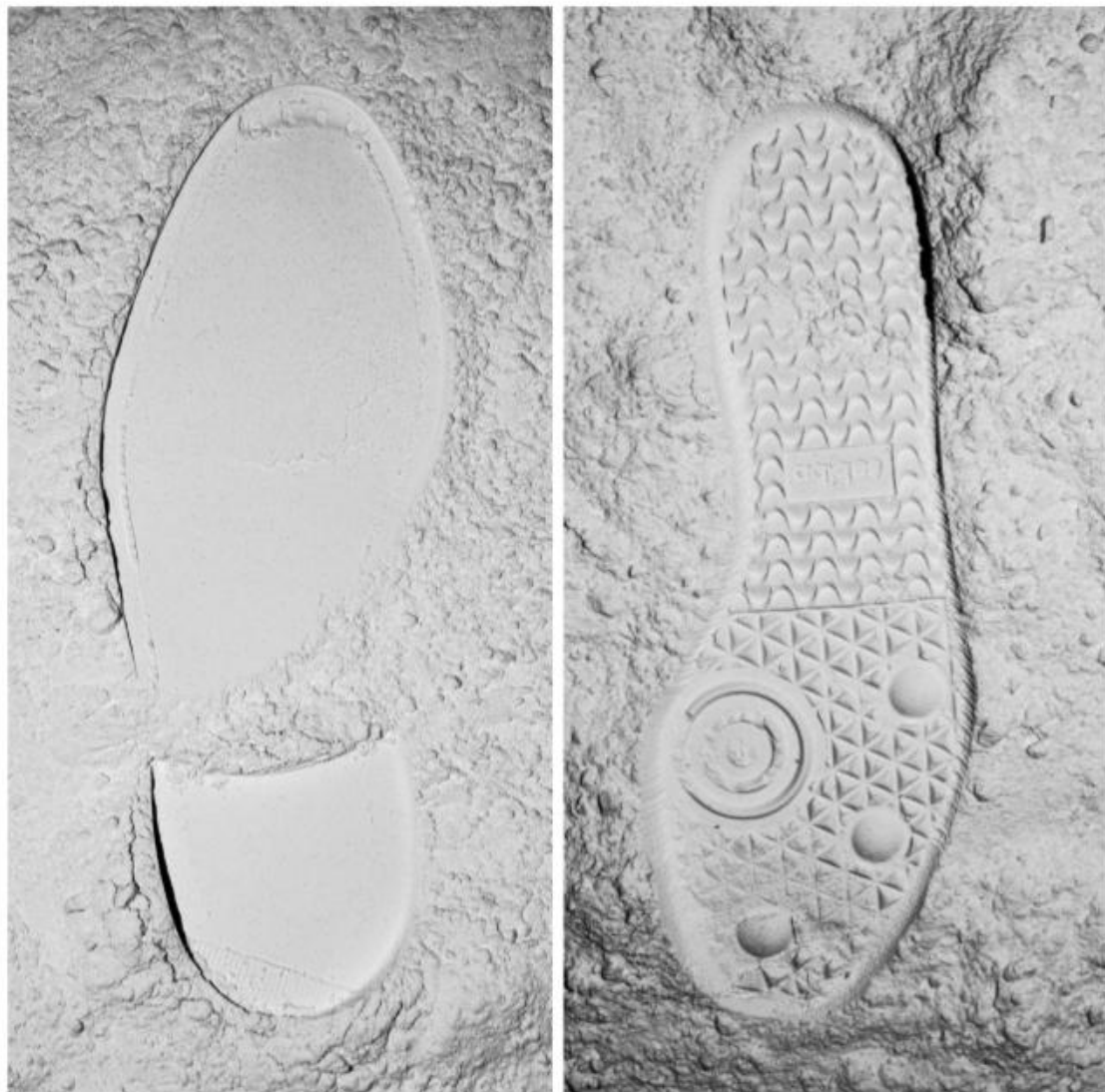
SHOW YOUR KIDS *an*
R-RATED MOVIE

BY KEVIN SINTUMUANG

I WATCHED ZACK SNYDER'S *JUSTICE LEAGUE* WITH MY KIDS WHEN THEY WERE eight and five. And they liked it. I mentioned this, with a bit of guilt considering its R rating, to Snyder during a Q&A. "It's a pretty soft R," he told me, as if to say I wasn't that terrible a parent. Sure, I had to ignore the kids' questions about what the Joker meant by giving Batman a "reach around," but for the most part, if your kids can handle curses and some violence, they can handle soft R's. One of the best parts of being a dad is knowing which rules are okay to break. The fatherly refrain of "no R-rated movies" is one.

Since then, we've added more soft R's to family movie night. *Game Night*, the Rachel McAdams/Jason Bateman kidnapping caper, was a hit, too. *Air*, the story behind the making of Air Jordans, is totally family friendly if you ignore the fact that they say *nutsack*. We've hit *The Holdovers* (an instant high school classic), *Terminator 2* (secretly about fatherhood), and *Good Will Hunting* (they'll need to learn about Boston somehow).

Kids are more capable of understanding media than we give them credit for, and the more we activate that media critic in them—and show them that movies can be pretty damn cool—the better. I watched *Heat* with my older daughter when she was nine, and she got it: The area between good guys and bad guys can be pretty gray. My younger daughter, now eight, wanted to watch *Oppenheimer* after it won the Oscar for Best Picture. I told her there was nudity. "Why does a movie about the nuclear bomb have nudity?" she asked. Good question. I didn't have a good answer. But we'll watch it, skip over those bits, and talk about it.



WHAT MY DAD WAS RIGHT ABOUT

I was afraid of turning into my father... until I did

BY MICHAEL SEBASTIAN

Here's a story about my dad that he won't like me telling you: When I was, I don't know, ten, I cleaned up spilled milk with our fabric toaster cover. My dad was not happy. "You know, Michael," he said, "sometimes you can be a real jerk." He wasn't wrong, and now that I have two of them myself, I know that everyone sometimes has this thought about their kids. But he said it to me.

My dad was an asshole sometimes. He had a short fuse and a certain way of doing things. How he loaded and unloaded the dishwasher—don't get me started.

He worked all the time. He wore a suit and tie six days a week. On his one day off, he'd wake up my older brother and me early to run errands, and he refused to let us change the station on the car radio. He was a classic father.

But he did give a shit. The old man showed up to every one of my baseball games, usually in that suit and tie. He persuaded his friend, a civil engineer, to build a toothpick bridge for a Boy Scout competition. (We came in second.) I wanted for nothing, including the college education for which he paid.

Then a funny thing happened when I became a dad. Despite trying not to, I also became my father. Not that it's all bad. I show up to games, even if it's usually in a jacket and tie. I help with Girl Scouts. But then there's the dishwasher...

Why does no one know how to load a dishwasher properly? Coffee mugs go on the upper-right rack. It's all about the geography of the kitchen, I explain to my wife and kids, who fail to grasp this. The cabinet where the mugs live is to the right of the dishwasher. When the mugs go where they belong, unloading is much easier—you save yourself a few steps and several minutes. Last month, I shared this strategy with my father. "Smart," he said approvingly. I wish I could bottle and sell the pride I felt.



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FROM THE EDITORS OF
Esquire

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Beyond the Beach

Orlebar Brown's trim (but not tight) trunks are exactly the fit you're looking for this summer

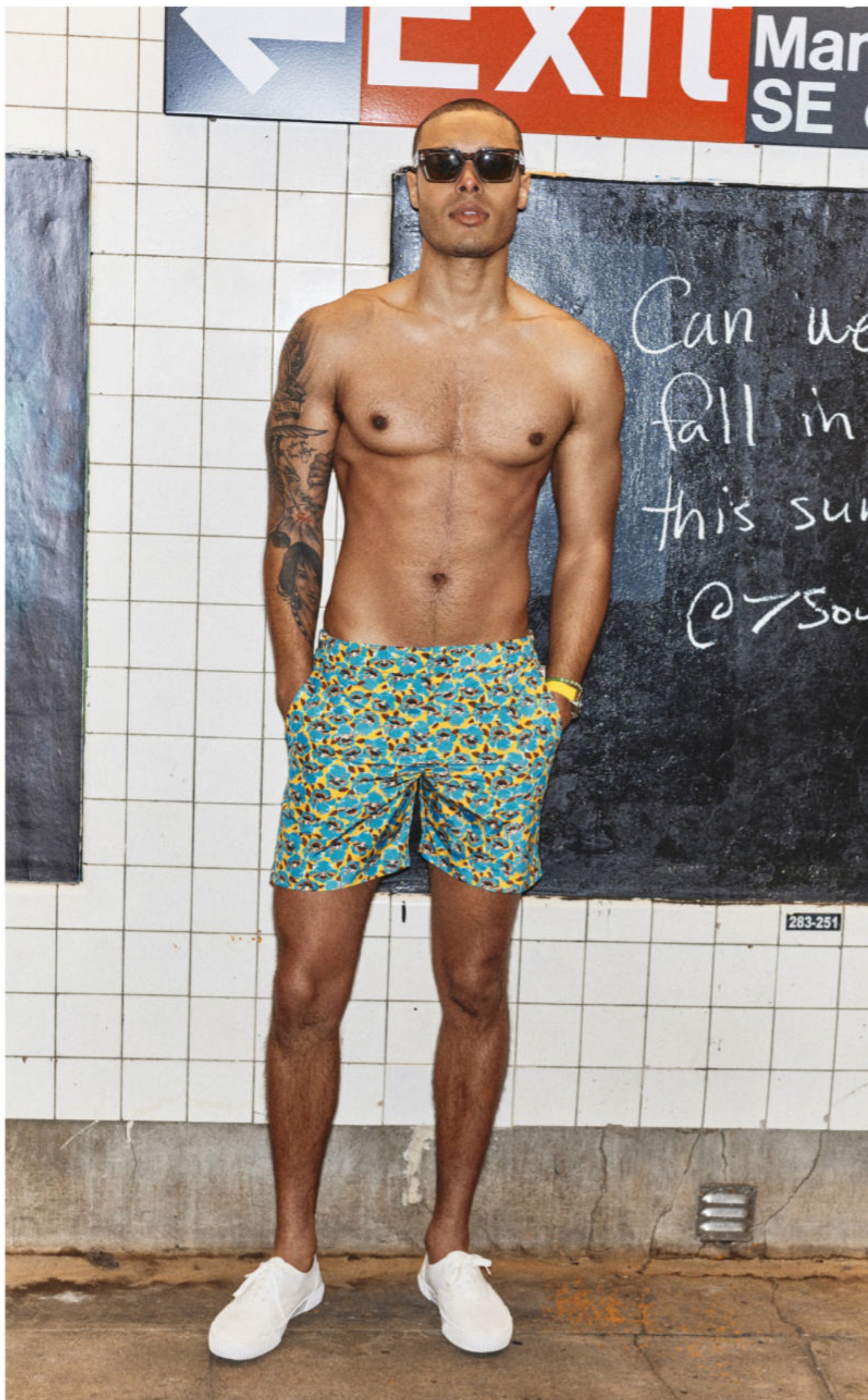
BY JONATHAN EVANS



AFTER YEARS OF ANYTHING-GOES

style, guys are cleaning up their act and getting dressed with a sense of occasion again. When it comes to swimwear, that means ditching big, baggy suits and opting for something with a more streamlined fit. Enter Orlebar Brown's Bulldog trunks. Cut to hit mid-thigh, equipped with a set waistband instead of elastic, and finished with tailoring-inspired tab adjusters at the side, they'll bring a welcome dose of refinement to any and all aquatic adventures. And once you've toweled off? Thanks to their quick-drying fabric and a look that's more "short" than "swim," all you need to do is throw on some shoes and a shirt—something with a camp collar or a knitted polo would pair particularly well—and you'll be ready to round out the evening at the beachside bar, no costume change required. 

TRUNKS (\$395) BY **ORLEBAR BROWN**; SNEAKERS (\$420) BY **THOM BROWNE**; KHAKI NAVY SCUBA WATCH (\$845) BY **HAMILTON**; SUNGLASSES (\$925) BY **AKONI**; BRACELET (\$225) BY **LAGOS**.



STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS. GROOMING: DEVRA KINERY. MODEL: JEFF MOORE AT NEXT.

UP, UP, AND AWAY

Breitling's weird, wild, and wonderful new watch is inspired by a 1999 balloon journey around the world

BY NICK SULLIVAN



EVERY ERA HAS ITS OWN AERONAUTICAL obsession. Around the turn of the 20th century, it was simply getting off the ground. By the '60s, it was getting to the moon. In the '90s, it was one of the few unconquered high-altitude feats: a nonstop balloon trip around the globe.

It sounds a little wacky, but this was serious business. The endeavor preoccupied 11 teams that made 21 attempts in all before Brian Piccard succeeded on his third try in 1999 with copilot Brian Jones on the Breitling *Orbiter 3*. The journey covered more than 28,000 miles in just under 20 days.

Now, 25 years after that accomplishment, Breitling is celebrating the *Orbiter 3*'s excursion with a new watch: the Aerospace B70 Orbiter. The graduated orange dial is inspired by the color of the *Orbiter 3*'s capsule. A dual analog/digital display reflects a '90s trend that is rare these days, especially in serious watchmaking. The newly created movement, which drives both functions, is the B70, a chronometer-certified SuperQuartz movement with ten times the accuracy of a standard quartz watch. While the analog hands display hours and minutes, the digital readout offers multiple timing functions, including a chronograph that registers increments of hundredths of a second.

But all that function aside, what makes this special edition really special is seen through the sapphire-crystal case back: a circular slice taken from the original *Orbiter 3* balloon's envelope. Which means wherever you take it, this watch—or a part of it at least—has already been around the world. 

AEROSPACE B70 ORBITER WATCH
(\$4,900) BY BREITLING, BREITLING.COM.

**Go to
Switzerland with
Esquire**

Chocolate and cheese are well and good, but when it comes to Swiss exports, we're all about the watches. Which is why, in May 2025, Esquire's resident watch nut, Nick Sullivan, will be hosting a handful of similarly minded horology enthusiasts for a once-in-a-lifetime tour of some of the finest manufacturers in the country.

Guests will visit the epicenters of luxury watchmaking—Geneva, Neuchâtel, the Vallée de Joux, and Bienne—to learn the craft while enjoying the most enticing Swiss cuisine along the way. And, yes, there will be chocolate and cheese, too. To learn more about the trip, head to Esquire.com/esquire-escapes.

PROP STYLING: HEATHER GREENE



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You Crazy Diamond

David Yurman's latest jewelry collection, the Vault, takes things to the highest level of luxury

BY JONATHAN EVANS

FINE IS . . . FINE. BUT IF YOU WANT TO REACH the very top tier of jewelry, you need to get high. The world of baubles and sparkles has layers. At the base is costume stuff that delivers the glitz but leans on cheap materials. Above that, there's fine jewelry, which employs precious metals and stones to considerably more refined effect. And above *that* is high jewelry, featuring the most exceptional gems, the most exacting craftsman-

ship, and the most exclusive pieces. These are the items with a provenance—and price—that demands you keep them under lock and key.

Which is, as it happens, the inspiration for the name of the latest collection from David Yurman: the Vault. Overseen by Evan Yurman, the CEO and the son of the founder, it's the first men's high-jewelry collection from the brand and showcases stunning works like hand-set diamond amulets, sculptural sapphire-and-platinum bracelets, and pavé chain necklaces. If those don't strike your fancy, you can also go bespoke. With the option to commission a one-of-a-kind piece from David Yurman's in-house artisans, your imagination is the only limit. Well, that and the number of commas in your checking account. But hey—if you've got the scratch, why not take the opportunity to shine?

SAPPHIRE CURB CHAIN BRACELET, BLACK DIAMOND BRACELET, DIAMOND CURB CHAIN BRACELET, DIAMOND BAND RING, AND DIAMOND DECO AMULET BY **DAVID YURMAN HIGH JEWELRY**; CHAIN NECKLACE (\$7,500) BY **DAVID YURMAN**; CARDIGAN (\$6,700) AND TROUSERS (\$1,550) BY **LORO PIANA**.

STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS.
GROOMING: DEVRA KINERY. MODEL: KHOREY
MCDONALD AT MARILYN NY.



SE Automatic

RADICAL SIMPLICITY
SWISS MADE SINCE 1881

MOVADO



ON DECK

A preppy staple (and occasional punchline), the boat shoe is ready for its latest turn in the spotlight

BY JONATHAN EVANS

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE WATER. Suddenly it seems like every brand is taking a fresh look at the boat shoe and saying, “Yeah, we can do something really cool with that.”

This isn’t a new phenomenon for preppy staples. Every few years or so, on a rotating schedule that only the style gods fully understand, society takes stock of tried-and-true pieces like chinos and oxford-cloth button-downs and realizes there’s a very good reason these items became classics in the first place. Cue the remixes, reinterpretations, and reinvigorated mass appeal.

With boat shoes, we’re squarely in the sweet spot. High-fashion houses and specialized brands alike are churning out exciting iterations that are a far cry from your grandpa’s sun-bleached standbys, but we haven’t yet hit the saturation point where you see boat shoes absolutely everywhere. Which means now is the perfect moment to take a new pair out for a spin.

What vibe do you want to roll with? You can opt for Sebago’s vintagey version or Dior’s designer take (complete with the famous Oblique jacquard). Chris Echevarria adds a whole lot of texture and a lug sole for his Sperry collab, while Polo Ralph Lauren keeps things reliably preppy. Camper offers cheeky color-blocking (and a mismatched second shoe that you can’t see here). Or, if you’re looking for something to stomp in, Jacquemus has you covered.

Whatever you decide, remember: The pairs with the non-marking outsoles are the only ones truly suited for the deck of a sloop or a schooner. Others are better for landlubbers. But even if yours aren’t seaworthy, rest assured they’re the right shoes for right now. 🚢

FROM LEFT: SHOE (\$375), **SPERRY BY CHRIS ECHEVARRIA**; SOCK (\$14) BY **AMERICAN TRENCH**. SHOE (\$860) BY **JACQUEMUS**. SHOE (\$195) BY **SEBAGO**; OVERALLS BY **COACH**. SHOE (\$138) BY **POLO RALPH LAUREN**; JEANS (\$365) BY **LEVI’S X ERL**; SOCK (\$30) BY **PANTHERELLA**. SHOE (\$990) BY **DIOR MEN**; SOCK (\$26) BY **SCHOSTAL ORIGINALS**. SHOE (\$190) BY **CAMPER**; SOCK (\$32) BY **ANONYMOUS ISM**.



STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS



Canali Chills Out

The iconic Italian brand may be known for tailoring, but its effortlessly casual clothes are a welcome evolution

BY NICK SULLIVAN

MENTION THE NAME CANALI IN MENSWEAR circles and tailoring comes to mind. That's reasonable: The Brianza-based brand, which is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, is certainly capable of producing an exceptional suit. Although its reputation is well earned, Canali didn't start by making tailored clothing. Its first product was a raincoat—an essential element of the everyday wardrobe. And now, in an increasingly casual world, the label is returning to its roots by embracing a more easygoing take on getting dressed each morning.

Canali calls it “gentleness”—a deliberate declaration of *no, grazie* to the loud, in-your-

face styling prevalent in runway fashion. There's still a sense of luxury and craftsmanship, of course, but now those high-end fabrics and time-honored techniques are deployed to make clothes for men with more than work in mind. Knitwear and casual shapes like reversible coats and trucker jackets break up the formal silhouette, and tailored pieces—take note of the trousers in particular—elevate the vibe while remaining rooted in relaxation thanks to a fuller cut.

Suits aren't gone entirely, and rightfully they never will be. But instead of feeling overly slick or stuffy, they follow the light and airy spirit of contemporary Mediterranean sartorialism, with minimal construction and breezy blends of linen, silk, and cotton in pale, off-duty colors. Could you wear them to the office this summer? Absolutely. But you'd be better off saving them for something more special, so they can remain separated—both physically and spiritually—from the drudgery of the daily commute. 

TOP: JACKET (\$3,060), SHIRT (\$395), KNIT SHIRT (\$940), AND TROUSERS (\$520) BY **CANALI**; SHOES (\$820) BY **MARSÈLL**; EARRING AND RINGS BY **ELIBURCH JEWELRY**. BOTTOM: SWEATER (\$7,840) BY **CANALI**; RING (\$6,840) BY **PROUNIS**; NECKLACE (\$2,360) BY **POMELLATO**.



STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS. GROOMING: DEVRA KINERY. MODEL: AMAURY VALERO AT NEXT.



ELEMENT AL
WINES

WHEREVER, WHENEVER, HOWEVER.
IN YOUR ELEMENT.



FASHION FOR YOUR FACE

High-end designers are charging into the skin-care game. Are they worth your time?

BY GARRETT MUNCE

MAJOR FASHION BRANDS ARE INTERESTED in your skin. Not in a creepy way. They are banking on the idea that if you like what they do for your wardrobe, you're going to love what they do for your mug. The good news is that these labels have technology and money that upstart brands usually don't. That translates into new ingredients, more elegant formulas, and packaging designed with the same care that goes into the clothes. So whether you're looking for a cutting-edge face cream, a simple all-in-one routine, or an excellent natural body lotion, here are three labels to know when you're ready to make over your medicine cabinet.

1

DIOR SAUVAGE MENCARE

A complete skin-care system in three steps, with products that utilize cactus, which is prized for its ability to hold moisture. There's a gentle cleanser (\$42) with charcoal to soak up dirt and oil, a hydrating toner (\$65) with pore-tightening and cooling properties, and a moisturizer-serum combo (\$95) that not only keeps your skin hydrated all day but also helps strengthen the skin barrier and reduce signs of aging. And yes, they all carry Dior's signature Sauvage scent—but not enough to irritate sensitive skin.

2

PRADA SKIN

Like the clothes that go down the runway, this new collection is all about innovation. The products include a proprietary blend of adaptogens that help balance your skin in the face of stressors—think rising global temperatures and pollution—as well as tried-and-true ingredients like hydrating hyaluronic acid, moisturizing Proxylane, the antioxidant vitamin CG, and barrier-strengthening ceramides. There's a refillable cream (\$390) with an innovative gel-to-balm texture that can be used morning and night, a concentrated face and eye serum (\$410), a micro-peel toning essence (\$135), and a gentle cream-to-foam cleanser (\$95).

3

A.P.C. SELF-CARE

The draw of A.P.C. clothes is that they're deceptively simple. The same DNA is infused in the brand's new line of body-care products. With at least 98 percent of their ingredients being of natural origin, the shower gel (\$50), body lotion (\$55), hand cream (\$30), and more are gentle and hydrating. The scent—a crowd-pleasing blend of floral orange blossom and fresh neroli—encourages relaxation and well-being. Even the packaging is thoughtful: All of it is made from recycled material and is recyclable itself.



HUBLOT




HUBLOT

BIG BANG UNICO

Vibrantly-coloured and patented orange ceramic case. In-house UNICO chronograph movement. Limited to 250 pieces.



THE GLASSES I'VE WORN FOREVER

Guy Trebay, a reporter for the *New York Times* Style section and author of the new memoir *Do Something*, explains why he sticks to the classics when it comes to eyewear

AS TOLD TO JONATHAN EVANS



TREBAY'S OWN MR. LEIGHT GLASSES (\$550 FOR A NEW PAIR).

I'VE WORN HORN-RIMMED GLASSES SINCE I was seven. In the early days, they were made in England. Those held me until I was in my 20s or 30s—and then they stopped making them. So I started chasing them, going to more and more obscure manufacturers until, finally, I couldn't find them at all.

Then I discovered Oliver Peoples, which had similar frames. They were a bit of a leap in price, but really nice. I wore those for quite a long time—and then they abruptly discontinued them. I was working at *The New York Times* at that point, so I wrote one of those stories that journalists do when some beloved thing is no more. And to my surprise, Larry Leight, the founder of Oliver Peoples, read it and brought the style back.

Along the way, I met Larry's son, Garrett, who started his own brand. By then, my look had changed a bit, so I changed to something slightly more squared off from his collection. My originals weren't so owlsh,

but they were kind of standard poindexter glasses. So I got these, and I've remained with them since.

The decision wasn't super evolved aesthetically. But I like to be consistent. I used to ride horses competitively, and a lot of the way I look at self-presentation originates in riding. Your horse had to be clean and well presented, but there wasn't much variation. It was functional, and so many things in menswear come from the truly functional—the military, the cavalry, or whatever. I like that idea. It's kind of like “If it ain't broke...”

If they were to discontinue these frames like they did my old ones, I'm not sure what I'd do. I might go back to being halfway unseeing by wearing old pairs—I have been known to do that—but I wouldn't want to be like a contestant on *Survivor* or Tom Hanks on that island. I should probably stockpile them. But then again, I'm not a child, so maybe I could just figure out how many pairs I need to get me to the end. ■

REQUIRED READING

Fox News portrays N.Y.C. as a cesspool. It's not. Vast portions of Manhattan are a fantasy of the Big Apple. The Disney version of Gotham. This is not the case in Guy Trebay's memoir, *Do Something*, the primary backdrop for which is 1970s New York, when it was an actual cesspool. Trebay brings the grit to life. It is a travel guide, physically and emotionally, from the Garment District to the Bronx. We meet locally famous weirdos and art-world icons, visit thrift shops and gay clubs, and, in between, learn about Trebay's troubled family history. *Do Something* will transport you, break your heart, and uplift you in ways Fox News could never. —Michael Sebastian

Where does the armpit end and the body begin?



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THE RAP-MUSIC PARADOX

I love, revere, and respect women. So how can I listen to music that demeans them?

THE LAST SUMMER OF MY TWEENS—1987—I GOT MY HANDS ON a cassette of Too \$hort's *Born to Mack* and was titillated by the first rap songs I'd heard with profanity. Beyond the curse words, the way \$hort spoke about women gobsmacked impressionable me. On "Freaky Tales," he boasts of several salacious escapades. On "Dope Fiend Beat," the album's very next song, he begins with his now-signature epithet—a sing-song *Biiiiiiiiitch!*—delivers a preamble, and launches into his first verse: "Bitches on my mind / I can't hold back, now's the time / All you loud-mouth bitches talk too much / And you dick-teasin' bitches never fuck."

My mom seized the tape but never trashed it, and I soon sleuthed it and began clandestine listening. Not only did *Born to Mack* use language to describe girls/women that had been verboten by my mother and sanctified great-grandmother—the two most important women in my life—its lyrics proffered a kind of manual for how to treat women, worked to inculcate me on the value of girls/women, or the lack thereof. N.W.A released *Straight Outta Compton* the next year, an album that became the standard-bearer for gangster rap. On "Dopeman," Ice Cube raps, "Strawberry, Strawberry is the neighborhood ho," characterizing a woman who'd have sex for crack in the hood. While \$hort and N.W.A were laying a foundation of patriarchy and misogyny and sexism, I was at least a decade from learning the meaning of any of those words, much less

considering them with informed acuity.

Just a few years later, I would head-bob before my varsity basketball games to Dr. Dre's "Bitches Ain't Shit," off *The Chronic*. "Bitches ain't shit but hos and tricks / Lick on these nuts and suck the dick," went the hook. "Gets the fuck out after you're done / Then I hops in my coupe to make a quick run."

Misogyny is derived from the Greek words for *hate* and *woman*. Dre's lyrics were the epitome of that hatred. Plus unlike the regional success of *Born to Mack*, *The Chronic* became a cultural phenomenon—it has sold more than 5 million copies and ranked 40th on a list of the best hip-hop albums of all time in *Rolling Stone*, which called it "landscape changing."

Between those two albums (but not just those two), blatant misogyny got mainstreamed. Meanwhile, on the personal front, my mother began a decades-long struggle with a crack addiction, which impacted how I perceived what I heard and normalized feelings of disappointment and distrust in her. By the time *The Chronic* came out, I'd tried my hand at selling crack, had a time or two in my teens, watched a woman, waifish and disheveled, totter into a dope house, announce she was broke, and offer to exchange sex for crack. Meaning my relationship to rap music is indivisible from the truth that at one point it was way more real-life than out-of-this-world hyperreality.

And it wasn't just sitting in the dope house. It was witnessing a couple of my homeboys watch the dope house from a window in our high school classroom (it was across the street) and dash to hit a lick when they saw a smoker approaching. It was my pimp father trying to indoctrinate me with his values. It was being nurtured by uncles who were pimps and dope dealers. It was having my favorite aunt murdered while she worked as a prostitute for one of my uncles (not her brother). It was having peers who started pimping themselves before we were old enough to buy liquor, plus seeing girls I went to school with work as their prostitutes or as strippers or end up pregnant or hooked on drugs. It was having several peers who put in work for their set. It was hearing that my high school was always under fire for poor academics. That was my world, from the time I was a Jheri-curled weebit until I moved away in my mid-20s.

My experience—which ain't the standard of Black life, nor was it an anomaly—made it almost impossible to dismiss these lyrics and, even though I knew they were harmful, tougher to condemn them. Only a fool would argue that misogyny isn't rampant in today's most popular rap music. Commonplace: dismissing women as lesser rappers. Commonplace: characterizing women only as sex objects. Commonplace: rappers boast-

ing of passing women around to fuck their boys. Commonplace: rappers demeaning women as dishonest or gold-digging. Commonplace: calling women bitches and hos and tricks and sluts.

Shouldn't no-damn-body diminish the harms misogyny can cause to *all* women. How it can metastasize into the accepting of rigid gender norms. How it can birth anxieties, wizen their esteem, foster a distrust of other women. How it can pummel them into objectifying themselves. How it can manifest eating disorders and self-harm. However, while all women are subject to the traumas of rap music, misogynoir—defined by feminist theorist Moya Bailey as anti-Black racist misogyny—is the beating heart of hip-hop.

Who's the "bitch"?

Watch the videos; look at the album covers. The overwhelming majority of them are Black or brown women, leaving little doubt as to whom we are supposed to associate with the word *bitch*. And it matters who's the bitch because Black and brown women already suffer a plethora of disadvantages compared with white women. Black women have shorter life spans and are more likely to die during childbirth. Have higher rates of obesity, heart disease, anemia. Make less money but are more likely to be head of a household, live in a segregated neighborhood, and have a lower property value, if they own property at all. Demeaning Black women as bitches-hos-tricks-and-sluts is like kick-

heard nothing critical about Future's lyrics:

"Stickin' to the code, all these hos for the streets / I put it in her nose, it's gon' make her pussy leak" ... "All my hos do shroom, nigga, all my hos do coke" ... "She think 'cause she exotic bitch, she attractive / That's the shit'll get you put up out the section" ... "You know these hos hungry, they gon' fuck for a name / I put her on the gang, she get fucked for a chain."

Is it a good thing that rap laced with misogyny is most popular? Hell no. My streaming it is without doubt part of the problem. Critical me, though, can't ignore that rap music was born as a response to systemic oppression, that it's part of a culture still shaped by those systems. What kid wants to live across the street from—or in—a drug house? Wants his sleep troubled by the racket of ghetto birds? Aims to sit in an apartment with a bare fridge while worrying over his mother's whereabouts? What kid wants his college dreams shot so far out of reach they might as well reside on the moon? Wouldn't significant changes in the culture of rap music demand significant changes in the circumstances of the people who are both its chief producers and its subjects? As bad as the misogyny is in rap—and it's almost impossible to imagine it worse—I know it's reflective of the me-against-the-world, survival-of-the-fittest codes that pervade the domains of the oppressed, rules that are never not also a battle of the sexes.

My streaming rap music LACED WITH MISOGYNY is part of the problem.

ing a wounded person while they're down, a person kept down by the societal ill that that's where they belong on account of their gender and how it intersects with their race. Who the bitch is matters because there ain't near enough in our culture to mitigate the harms done to Black women.

Furthermore, if the bitches-hos-tricks-and-sluts are our women—the blood and relation of the Black men who dominate hip-hop—then what does that say about our self-worth? Is our hatred toward them—the same women who birthed and nurtured us—also a form of self-loathing? If they lack humanity, how could we not?

Weeks back, I downloaded Future and Metro Boomin's collab album *We Don't Trust You* and played their song "Like That"—a tune that shot to the top of the *Billboard* Global 200 chart—on repeat. The rap world tizzied over Kendrick's verse dissing Drake. But what's hell telling is that I've

Why am I still listening? For better and for damn sure for worse, rap music still feels representative of my culture, is still indicative of the experiences that shaped me. I often deceive myself that I'm able to listen to it only as entertainment. That my critical ear is vigilant. That rap needs knowing listeners who can appraise it. But to keep it 100, the older I get, the less I can engage with it, the more rap music weighs on my spirit. At this age, it's hard to listen without sadness. Beneath all the rap-beef bravado and celebrated violence and emphatic materialism I hear pain, and I know that so much of the music issues from a broken place. It's a place I know well. And because I do and also refuse to believe I'm any better than what I come from, entertaining the thought of not listening anymore feels like forsaking my culture, like proof that I'd devolved into a person I despise: an Uncle Tom who looks down his nose at his people, the most wounded ones. ■



HOW I THREW MY FIRST PUNCH

After a lifetime of running from confrontation, I took up boxing at age 40. In the ring, I finally discovered what it was like to deliver a blow—and to take a few on the chin myself.

BY SCOTT HULER

WHEN I WAS 40, I RAISED MY FISTS AND DID NOT RUN AWAY FROM A FIGHT for the first time since sixth grade.

It happened in a gym straight out of a *Rocky* movie. I was spending that year working in a rented office on the second floor of a three-story walk-up in Rome, Georgia. I filled my time staring out the office window, tapping gloomily at my keyboard on a failing project. One day, I heard banging.



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Fire-escape stairs led to a newly cleared third floor. “A gym,” an intense, wiry man said. And sure enough: heavy bags, speed bags, weights. Along one brick wall: a ring, canvas duct-taped directly to the wood floor. Plaster hung in patches; the bags hung directly from exposed roof joists.

The wiry man was Lee Fortune, onetime holder of the World Boxing Council’s Continental Americas middleweight title. Did I want to learn to box? Lee, a cop, planned to work the gym around his schedule. It would be \$25 a month for limitless time and coaching, several afternoons a week. “Not kickboxing,” he said. “Real boxing. Sparring. You’ll wear headgear.” I said sure.

“A man you’ve never met before said for \$25 he will hit you in the head,” a friend summarized. What else did I have going on?

But there was more. When I was growing up in suburban Cleveland, unless you were an athlete, you were a school playground victim. You were pushed, teased, hit; I was, anyway. The adults in those days blithely assured us that standing up for yourself cured bullies, but I never witnessed that. I tried once, against my will, in sixth grade. The class decided, seemingly en masse, that a dodgeball incident required playground resolution. I told the other kid it was stupid, tried to walk away, finally started pushing back, and ultimately ended up on the lawn in a ring of jeering classmates, flailing. “Look,” I heard someone say. “It’s the two queers fighting.” I kept on until we both stopped swinging, then went, crying, to my piano lesson. The lead bullies took no notice; as for me, I spent the remainder of my youth and young adulthood resolutely avoiding, even running from, fights.

All kinds of fights. I slunk away from arguments with parents and siblings; retreated, stung, from locker-room teasing. In junior high, I tried the bullied-child strategy of bullying someone else, but I failed at the first push back; when I was randomly hit during a high school eruption of race-related strife, I simply stood, mystified at why and what to do. As an adult walking on city streets, I quickly withdrew from anything threatening, once sprinting away from a random beatdown that left both me and a friend bloodied. Fighting back seemed not unthinkable, but unimaginable.

When I was 40, that gym represented an opportunity: Maybe it was time to fight. I was instructed to buy high-top sneakers, cotton hand wraps, a pair of training gloves. And, ominously, a mouth guard.

The first weeks were boot camp. About a dozen of us—all men in their mid-20s, except me—stretched, jumped rope, did gym exercises. Lee, in his mid-30s, taught us to wrap our hands. The wrapping and gloves, I learned, protect the boxer’s hands, not his opponent’s head. This was a hitting sport.

We learned to crouch and angle our shoulders, protecting still-soft bellies. Left hand up by left cheek, right around the chin, peering between gloves, we adopted the classic fighter’s pose. Lee taught us the jab: straighten that left, pop!, directly at the heavy bag. Then the cross, the overhand right—launched not from the shoulder but from the hips, pushing off that back leg and shifting your entire bodyweight. I had always heard “throw a punch,” but on those grimy wood floors facing a stained heavy bag, I understood.

“Jab!” Lee would say. Then the hooks, left and right; the jab and cross were one and two, the hooks three and four. “Give him the old one-two” suddenly had meaning. Lee explained: The one, he leans to his left; the two gets him sliding hard to his right, where your left hook meets the side of his head. We got used to pounding that heavy bag and learned the speed bag, which is about rhythm, “bappity-bappity-bappity,” and about holding arms high enough to make shoulder mus-

cles cry out by the end of a three-minute round. That three-minute clock defines everything, followed by a buzzer and a minute of gasping rest.

It was working. My biceps strengthened, my shoulders swelled; my wife called me “Gregory Pecs.” I started to think maybe I could actually hit somebody. Then Lee said, “Bring your mouth guards Thursday,” and my stomach dropped.

We had begun moving with Lee in the ring, jabbing at his hands in paddles, learning to duck his slow-motion swipes, but sparring was different, and the gym felt different that day. Lee checked mouth guards, chose boxers of similar size, jammed competition gloves over outstretched fingers, taped laces. I had to yoga-breathe for calm.

We entered the ring and the buzzer sounded. Lee had to encourage us to approach each other, and when the first tentative jabs were thrown, terrified backpedaling followed. “Don’t turn your back!” Lee yelled, pushing us back together. But when I crouched and faced my opponent, a guy heavier but shorter and 15 years my junior, he connected. With the headgear, I felt impact, but not pain. A lifetime of running from fights and that was it? I relaxed. We moved and probed, and once I got a right hand through, I realized I had hit him.

It may have been the first punch I landed since that day on the playground. It may have been the first one in my life. The buzzer sounded; suddenly, hands were removing my headgear. Soon others wore the lace-up gloves and I leaned on a bag and watched, vibrating. I had fought someone.

WE SPARRED EVERY FEW weeks. My movements grew more confident as I learned to parry and feint. I began to think

I was a guy who could take care of himself. One day Lee’s dad, Roy, a small-time promoter, took me aside. He put together cards for the casinos in Biloxi. Headliners required undercards, and two-round jousts earned \$500 per palooka. Did I want to fight? I was 41 and in the best shape of my life.

“Don’t you think your life is hard enough with your brains on the inside?” my wife responded at home. Roy shrugged and life went on. Then one day, Lee approached.

— “A man you’ve never met before said for \$25 he’ll hit you **IN THE HEAD**,” a friend summarized. What else did I have going on?

“I have a bout coming,” he said, with an opponent he called a slow white guy. “I need you for sparring.” Before I knew it, I was in headgear and gloves in the ring. “To your left,” Lee would say, and I would float that way, jabbing, trying an occasional combination. He’d move forward and I’d try to duck, defend, feint, and then suddenly I was leaning against the ropes watching the light fixture swim in circles. Lee backed away as Roy and a couple others held me up. “When you see that big right hook coming,” Roy said, “you know you can duck.”

I pulled out my mouth guard. “If I could see that hook coming,” I said, “we would be having a different conversation.” I ceased to spar with Lee. I never really believed I was a guy who could take care of himself. But evidently, I can take a punch.

The next year, I lived in Nashville and took a boxing class in an office building basement. When in a newspaper office I playfully threw an air combination at other writers, one jumped, startled. “Jeez,” he said. “Do you box?”

I guess I did, a little. But I retired with a record of 0-0 lifetime. You’ll find me now on a bicycle or running underneath a fly ball. Not as good for the pecs, but fewer headaches. And no troubling echoes from childhood playgrounds, either. ■



Learn more



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THE SECOND COMING OF THE POLITICAL CONVENTION

For the first time in decades, at both the Republican and Democratic national conventions this summer, we're at risk
of honest-to-God politics breaking out
BY CHARLES P. PIERCE

THE FIRST NATIONAL POLITICAL CONVENTION THAT I EVER WENT TO WAS ONE I DIDN'T really attend. It was 1976. I had spent the previous 18 months trying to get Congressman Mo Udall elected president and had failed. (Not that it was entirely my fault.) The Democrats had come together in New York to nominate Jimmy Carter, whom we had chased all over the country, only to lose narrowly to him in almost every primary. We lost in Wisconsin when everybody went to bed thinking we'd won, and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* got caught with a Dewey Defeats Truman headline in its early editions. Then, in May, with the campaign barely breathing, we lost to Carter in Michigan by fewer than 2,500 votes. I still have nightmares.

I felt that, out of loyalty, I should watch Mo's concession speech in New York. I quickly learned that you don't just walk into a political convention. Instead, I went to a workingman's Irish bar near Madison Square Garden and dropped a fiver on the bartender so he'd turn on coverage of the convention happening a few blocks away. With the TV rattling away at the other end of the bar, I heard Mo say goodbye.

Four years later, the Democrats were back in New York. So was Mo, delivering the keynote address at that convention, and so was I, in the employ of *The Boston Phoenix* this time, a press credential around my neck. The big story then was Senator Edward Kennedy's unsuccessful primary challenge to Jimmy Carter, which had handed Ronald Reagan a fat lead in the polls. Ill feeling was at high tide in the Garden when Mo took to the podium.

In a passage that will echo down into the conventions this summer, Mo explained how the Reagan forces had refused to seat his friend and fellow Arizonan Barry Goldwater as a delegate at their 1976 convention because he had supported the incumbent Gerald Ford against Reagan's challenge. It was enough for the rising movement conservatism to cast Goldwater into the wilderness forever.

I suppose my friend Barry Goldwater to most Americans could be considered conservative. Mr. Republican. Yet four years ago, the Arizona delegation, controlled by Reaganites, denied this man a delegate seat at the Republican convention. Mr. Republican himself was not welcome....

Reagan's people spent the 1980 convention rubbing the old wounds raw. That year, Kennedy had done the same thing to Carter, an incumbent of his own party, and the wounds were fresh and bleeding. Meanwhile, Mo Udall was warning that the GOP was changing in serious and dangerous ways.

Since Lincoln's time, the Republican party has held an honorable place in our history. Most of the time, it was broad-based. There were strong conservatives but a welcome as well for moderate easterners like Saltonstall, Case, Aiken, Javits... and for moderate westerners like Earl Warren and Tom Kuchel. But today, we see a GOP that is increasingly narrow. It has become a party with no left or no center... dominated by the radical right, urging radical economics at home and belligerent policies abroad.

Tell me if any of this sounds familiar.

THE 21ST-CENTURY POLITICAL CONVENTION is an ongoing anachronism, a smokeless smoke-filled room in technological drag. (Hell, in 2020, amid the pandemic, we proved we could have conventions at which nobody convened.) Spectacle seemed to overwhelm the original purpose until 2016, when

an exception to this rule proved it at the GOP convention in Cleveland. The surface atmosphere was bizarre and brutal. The crowd jostled Ted Cruz's wife. Rudy Giuliani went bananas from the podium. And the nominee delivered an acceptance speech that found its culmination in one line: "I alone can fix it."

But seen from the vantage point of 2024, the most important event of the convention occurred long before the lights came on in the arena.

It was July 11, 2016. The Republican platform committee held a meeting during which, at the instigation of Paul Manafort's lackeys (and God

The modern CONVENTION is an ongoing anachronism, a smokeless SMOKE-FILLED room.

knows who else, *tovarich*), the committee pulled the teeth on an amendment to the platform committing the GOP to a policy supplying Ukraine with military hardware to help it defend itself against Russian aggression. Manafort's guys—and, through them, the Trump campaign—were adamant about the matter. The delegates in that room were completely baffled.

Party platforms are one of the few things heretofore more useless than party conventions, but subsequent events have proved this change in the Republican platform to be enormously important. It demonstrated that the Trump campaign was open for business with Russia. And a week later, lo and behold, the hacked DNC emails were leaked right before the Democratic convention in Philadelphia. The smoke-filled hotel room had become an air-conditioned server farm outside St. Petersburg.

THIS IS THE WAY YOU ONCE STAMPED a convention:

If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

That was William Jennings Bryan, enemy of eastern moneyed powers, at the 1896 Democratic Na-

tional Convention in Chicago. And this, courtesy of the June 13, 1920, issue of *The New York Times*, is how you once maneuvered a nomination:

All through the hot and sultry night those who had taken positions of leadership in party affairs labored among themselves in the effort to find some solution of the problem of selecting a suitable candidate for president. In the end, no success attended their effort, as far as an agreement that would affect all groups and interests was concerned. ¶ The name of Senator Harding figured in all the conferences.

That was how we ended up with Warren G. Harding as president, at the 1920 Republican Na-

tional Convention, held in Chicago, where the Democrats will be this summer. Writing from that convention, Kirke Simpson of the Associated Press broke the story:

Harding of Ohio was chosen by a group of men in a smoke-filled room early today as Republican candidate for president.

Chicago has a long history with unusual conventions, and that's without even mentioning the extended bloodletting there in 1968. There's a rumbling in the air that both conventions may well be those rare gatherings at which spectacle gives way to actual politics. Surely the sudden eruption of the issue of American support of Israel for its policies in Gaza will transform what should have been an artful combination of coronation and farewell for President Biden into a tense, edgy enterprise with a bit of 1968's flavor. God only knows what will happen when the Republicans gather in Milwaukee with their vengeance-sodden exercise in American rhetorical carnage to nominate Donald Trump for the third time in a row. If Gaza explodes in Chicago after the Republicans present a waltz in riot gear, we may very well find our politics to be deranged beyond all recall. We may find ourselves nostalgic for the days when spectacle ruled the day. We may miss the brass bands, and the sing-alongs, and the hats shaped like the Hoover Dam. We might even miss the smoke-filled room. **E**

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By **Madison Vain** Photographs by *Norman Jean Roy* Styling by **Bill Mullen** —.—

g o o d



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“DO

YOU KNOW THE WAY TO BELVEDERE CASTLE?”

Bill Skarsgård and I have been walking for an hour and forty-seven minutes, winding our way aimlessly around Central Park on a moody New York City morning in April. Over the bridges, around the baseball fields, past the amphitheater, and through the nature sanctuary. Twice.

Now we’re suddenly facing a middle-aged, brunette woman in workout clothes who’s looking at us expectantly. Neither of us, however, has the faintest idea how to locate Belvedere Castle, a Central Park landmark and former lookout tower completed in 1872 and designed in the style of a miniature, well, *castle*.

Skarsgård freezes, leaving me to apologize to our fellow park walker for not knowing which way she should head. She hurries along, none the wiser about whom she just met. It’s the first time we’ve interacted with any of the hundred or so people we’ve passed this morning. And while there is an inherent compliment in being asked for directions in Manhattan—who doesn’t hope they pass for a New Yorker?—Skarsgård mainly just seems relieved that it wasn’t a fan making an approach.

It poured down rain all morning, and clouds still hang low over the city, trapping thick, lukewarm air. The gloomy weather somehow feels appropriate given the thirty-three-year-old’s upcoming slate of films. In August, he’ll lead a second—bigger, bloodier, sexier—adaptation of *The Crow*, among the most hotly anticipated reimaginings in recent memory. And come Christmas, he’ll sink his fangs into audiences with his interpretation of a notorious cinematic monster, Count Orlok, in *Nosferatu*. Unbothered strolls through the park, in other words, may soon be a thing of the past. “I hope not,” Skarsgård says to the suggestion.

Born and raised in Stockholm, Skarsgård has spent time in Manhattan over the years, but this is his first visit to New York in half a decade. After breaking big in his home country in high school and then heading for Hollywood, he bounced from movie set to movie set and TV show to TV show before eventually settling down again in Stockholm. Along the way, he’s

Shirt and trousers by **Hermès**; tie by **Title of Work**; belt by **the Leather Man, NYC**; ring and wallet chain by **Werkstatt:München** (worn throughout).

built one of the most curious and compelling catalogs of any actor his age.

Just as he disappears into his Manhattan surroundings today, he disappears completely into his roles, from an evil clown (Pennywise in the behemoth horror series *It*) to a French Cajun thug (the Marquis in *John Wick: Chapter 4*) to a profoundly troubled World War II veteran (Willard Russell in Antonio Campos’s *The Devil All the Time*). Wearing a matching navy set of loose-fitting (but structured) trousers, a quarter-zip sweater, and an even more structured pullover with dark sneakers, he’s a total chameleon despite his six-foot, three-inch frame and bright-green eyes.

But it’s not just his ability to transform that surprises; it’s his desire to embrace such characters at all. Deeply flawed and occasionally even disgusting, these are not the roles that make a man a movie star. That’s okay—Skarsgård is searching for something else.

YOU KNOW THE NAME. SKARSGÅRD. YOU’VE KNOWN IT SINCE HIS father, Stellan, broke out in the U.S. nearly thirty years ago, in the midst of an international career that boasts more than a hundred projects—*Good Will Hunting*, *Mamma Mia!*, and *Dune* among them—and has earned him a Golden Globe as well as a suite of European acting awards. Also since his oldest brother, Alexander, first spiked pulses as Eric Northman on HBO’s racy vampire fantasy *True Blood*. And since his second-oldest brother, Gustaf, became the star of every dad’s favorite History-channel show, *Vikings*.

Bill is the fourth of Stellan and My Skarsgård’s six children. Five boys, one girl. (He has two younger half siblings from his father’s second and current marriage to Megan Everett-Skarsgård.) The family’s home—an apartment in Södermalm, the southern island in Stockholm, one floor beneath their cousins and across the street from their grandparents—was busy and loud. “It was just, constantly, open doors, running up and down the staircase,” he recalls.

But it wasn’t only Skarsgård’s crowding around the dinner table. “All of us, in our respective groups, would be the ones bringing friends back home to us,” Bill says. It wasn’t typical in Sweden, he explains. “The only families I could properly relate to were my immigrant friends from the Middle East.”

When Stellan booked jobs, he and My would decamp to set, all their kids in tow. Los Angeles, Canada, Southeast Asia—until high school, everyone went. My, a medical doctor by profession, would tutor her brood while Stellan worked. The culture shock became the thrill.

By the time Bill was born, Alexander and Gustaf, fourteen and ten years his senior, respectively, had each already logged their first onscreen credits. But his brothers’ embrace of Stellan’s profession made his own decision to pursue acting harder, not easier, Bill admits. “When I was a teenager, I didn’t like the idea of being number four.” He tried other endeavors, but nothing stuck. And though he was hesitant, Swedish casting departments and directors weren’t. “The next Skarsgård” has a certain appeal, and one by one, movies and TV shows that spiked his curiosity presented themselves. “I felt like, ‘Okay, I may not want to be an actor, but I want to make *this* movie.’”

His worries about constant comparisons were not totally unfounded. Recalling the headlines and reviews that followed his earliest projects, he says, “Two thirds of all the articles were like, ‘Here we go again...’”

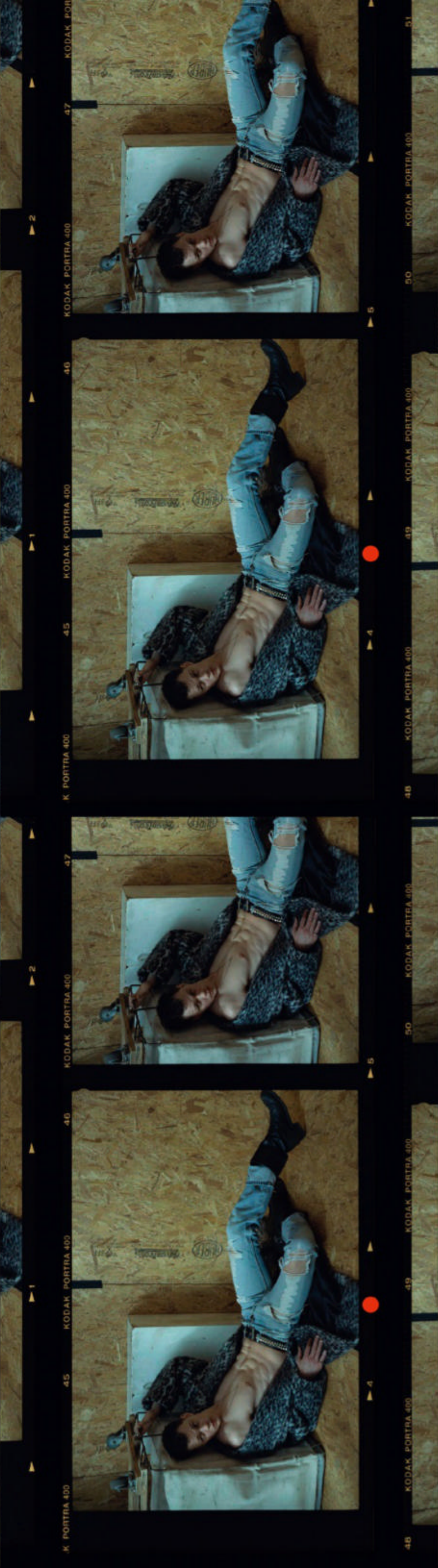
Late in high school, Skarsgård was cast in the coming-of-age film *Behind Blue Skies*, and then he lined up two other roles in projects that would, not through his own design, debut within a year of each other. If that sounds like a young actor’s dream, chances are you’re not from Sweden. Only a few dozen feature films get made annually in the Scandinavian country, and Skarsgård quickly found himself overexposed.

“Sweden is very known for tall-poppy syndrome,” he explains. (For a visual reference: The plant that towers above the rest is the one that gets clipped.) You can be successful but not *too* successful. “I knew I wouldn’t work in Sweden for like ten years,” he says now.

He made his way to L.A., experienced his first pilot season, and booked *Hemlock Grove*, a scripted series from the then-nascent Netflix. Skarsgård has



Coat by **Dolce & Gabbana**; Levi's from **SumShitIFound Vintage, Brooklyn**; belt by **the Leather Man, NYC**.



worked, almost without a break, ever since. He jumped from production to production—2016’s massive third entry in the Divergent Series, *Allegiant*; 2017’s *Atomic Blonde*—each role bigger than the last. And then he booked *It*.

A second screen adaptation of Stephen King’s 1986 horror novel, the film—the first of two chapters—would go on to become the third-highest-grossing R-rated movie of all time after debuting in late 2017. But before it could shatter sales records, director Andy Muschietti needed to find his Pennywise. He was open to anyone—male or female, young or old—for this version. They just had to be able to terrify.

The role was unlike anything else on his résumé at the time, but Skarsgård wanted it. On his way to a callback, he drove through Los Angeles, his face caked with self-applied clown makeup, testing out different manicured laughs until he felt the character begin to burble inside him.

“Something mesmerized me,” recalls Muschietti of Skarsgård’s earliest interpretation of the monster. The actor had a boyish energy that the director felt was key to the portrayal, but it was his way of sending shivers down your spine that stayed with the filmmaker. Or, as Muschietti says: “One second he can act all cute, and then the next, there’s something ancestral and dark that just appears. His ability to transform is mind-blowing to me.”

Euphoria creator Sam Levinson, who worked with Skarsgård on 2018’s *Assassination Nation*, says something similar: “His charm pulls you in, but there’s always an unpredictability lurking under the surface.”

For those of a certain age, there was, at the time, already an iconic portrayal of Pennywise haunting their memories: Tim Curry’s, from the 1990 miniseries version of *It*. That was the measuring stick that audiences, critics, and the general online commentariat were using to evaluate the young Swede. The pressure was on. Skarsgård understands just how much today, but when he accepted the role, he had absolutely no fucking clue. “When you are twenty-six, you don’t feel young at all, but now, looking back at it, I was a kid,” he says. “It was fairly early on in my career to take on some-

self through this at all. “Usually, I’m like, why am I doing this to myself? I should not do this. It’s not healthy for me.” He starts daydreaming about alternatives—like becoming an accountant. “Something more stable,” he says.

Of course, he wouldn’t really leave his profession. Couldn’t. “There are those moments,” he says, “when you’re totally lost in the moment. When during the whole take you never thought once about the fact that you’re doing it. You aren’t acting.” It’s beyond that, he explains. “Just being.”

FOR A GUY WHO HAS WORKED AS CONSISTENTLY—AND IN SUCH colossal projects—as Skarsgård, you’ll find surprisingly few interviews with him on the Internet. A handful of podcasts. Just a couple profiles. He doesn’t mince words: “I just don’t really enjoy them.” (No offense taken.) Being Bill Skarsgård may be interesting, but the way he sees it, that’s a reality to protect, not reveal.

Fame has made him uncomfortable since he was too young to even know what fame meant. “I remember going in grocery stores and my dad would go, ‘Can you go grab the milk in this-or-this aisle?’ And once I walked away from him, I would hear people be like, ‘Do you see who’s here?’” Skarsgård couldn’t understand why his own father’s arrival caused such a stir, but he knew he didn’t like it. “I felt violated; strangers are whispering and talking about my dad.”

Skarsgård is in a long-term relationship with Swedish actress Alida Morberg, and they share a five-year-old daughter. He’s been able to protect the space around him and his family fairly easily, he says. He’s also managed to get darker and, delightfully, weirder in terms of the roles he accepts. The vengeful Mark in *Assassination Nation*. The zany Mickey in *Villains*. The supernaturally evil The Kid on Hulu’s *Castle Rock* (which is also connected to the Stephen King universe). The braggadocious Swedish outlaw Clark Olofsson on Netflix’s *Clark*. The CGI supervillain Kro in Marvel’s *Eternals*.

Skarsgård is _____ obsessive when he works. “Usually, I’m like,

thing that had so many eyeballs and expectations on it.”

And a marketing stunt by the studio sparked a baptism by fan fire. As Skarsgård remembers it, “They did a thing that I felt was kind of mean.” Before he started filming, the studio released a photo of him in costume to drum up excitement. Social-media feeds went wild, and fan blogs tore him apart. “I was so incredibly nervous to start this job, and then the Internet is having so many hateful opinions on the weird, strange look of the thing,” he recalls.

He couldn’t sleep. The insults echoed through his mind all night long. “This looks so stupid.” “Lame.” “Boooo.” But, in time, the haters forced him to make a decision that would change his approach to acting forever. “You can only make this performance to please yourself,” he says of the new attitude. He made himself both the creator and the audience in his mind, and he figured out what he wanted to see. What he thought was cool. Unsettling. *Terrifying*.

“It unlocked something in me,” he admits. “And it gave me the confidence that I can take on any challenge.” Long pause. Little smile. “At least, that’s how I feel when I accept these things.”

Do you ever have doubts? The answer comes fast: “Every movie I do,” he says, laughing.

Skarsgård is obsessive when he works. Spiraling so far into the psyche of his character, he usually comes up only to ask why the hell he’s putting him-

Not every project has worked, but Skarsgård’s contributions usually have. “He has inhabited those roles, so he disappears,” says Rupert Sanders, who directed him in *The Crow*, “and that’s a testament to how good he is. You don’t see the actor anymore.”

There might be a reason for that. “It tends to become life-and-death for me,” says Skarsgård of his approach to each character. It may not be sustainable, he says, but it’s the only way he knows. And if he’s being honest, he enjoys the hunt. As he says, “I want to explore my own limitations.” *Explore*. It’s the exact word that shows up when I speak to many of his former collaborators.

From Muschietti: “What I saw in Bill that really excited me was his desire to explore.”

Campos: “The people that you tend to admire tend to be on a path of exploring what they’re interested in, regardless of public opinion. And Bill is excited by making those choices.”

With his leading role in *The Crow*, however, all eyes will be on Skarsgård. Expectations for the movie are sky-high, and this time, it’s his own face—big eyes, turned-up nose, rueful smile—front and center. It’s fair to say that he has mixed feelings about this proposition. “There’s definitely worry about that,” he admits, speaking about what the release may do to his public profile. More eyeballs. More attention. More whispers at the grocery store. “I’m trying to view the fame aspect as a challenge and navigate

through it in a way that I'll find happiness," he says. "I really don't think my line of profession is a recipe for happiness or contentment. Not a lot of us are happy. And the more the fame is increased, the more turbulent and scary life becomes."

Skarsgård tries to keep those worries out of his mind when he's picking jobs. He's adamant that he is building his career not with some grand vision but rather role by role. Yet when you look at his filmography, it is undeniable that the stories he is drawn to are often twisted—occasionally, as he says, even "pure evil."

"He doesn't want to be a Hollywood heartthrob," says Sanders. "And that's the legacy of a long career to me—if you're not involved in the Hollywood machine and you're creating roles that you are emotionally connected to. It's like buying art. You just buy what you want to see on your walls and not what you think is going to make you money. And he's just got a weird taste in art."

David Leitch, who directed Skarsgård in *Atomic Blonde*, feels he still has much more to show. "He's an actor that I believe can do anything," the filmmaker says. "It'll just be a matter of time before he does something that reflects his comedic chops."

Skarsgård frequently gets asked why he favors such dark characters. There is a subtext to the question: Why is a guy who looks as good as he does, who could earn a hell of a lot of money playing lovable hunks and heroes, making himself so damn terrifying, so damn unlikable—and perhaps unmarketable—onscreen? Well, those roles are boring. Diving into the psyche of Count Orlok, a vampire raised by Belial's own hand, though? Now, that's fun. "You have to use all of your imagination to try to come up with something cohesive," he says of the appeal.

It's also a two-way street, he reminds me. You can only book what you get offered, after all. "I'm drawn toward them the same way they're drawn toward me."

or unrealistic—like, ten head kicks in *Power Rangers*—he was vehemently against it," says Skarsgård.

We want what we can't have, don't we? Once Skarsgård was able to download and stream on his own, he discovered he loved those sorts of films. "My dad was morally against violence. So I wasn't allowed to have toy guns," he says. "But I've never held those ideals. I grew up in a different time. I don't think playing a violent video game makes you a violent person." Actually, he adds, "I've always found violence fascinating."

Skarsgård still considers himself a movie lover, but he's streaky when it comes to sitting down to watch something he hasn't seen. He also goes through prolonged periods when he isn't watching anything at all.

When I ask him about his hobbies—or anything he generally enjoys—he answers similarly.

What about TV? "In and out."

Do you drink? "Off and on."

Do you like when home is a loud and busy place, or do you crave quiet? "I go in and out of different phases."

What *do* we know? He likes to cook. And, describing what downtime looks like for him, his partner, and their daughter, he says, "We're adventurers." They're with him in New York right now. Last night, they had a dinner of "tortellini and chicken parm" at Patsy's.

Skarsgård does admit to having at least a few vices—coffee and nicotine mainly. Weed as well. In February, TMZ reported that he had been arrested in October 2023 for cannabis possession at Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. That definitely wasn't his first time carrying it, but "it was my first time getting caught," he quips, adding: "There's ways to go in Sweden in terms of legalizing it and just generally being very conservative in that aspect."

He loves living near his family. One by one, each of the adult children has moved back to Stockholm. He and his siblings get together often and, as everyone's family has grown, they've come to basically overrun the Skars-

why am I doing this to myself? I should not do this. It's not healthy for me."

NOW IS A GOOD TIME TO DIVULGE A SECRET: BILL SKARSGÅRD, THE scariest clown ever to fill the big screen at your local theater, is not a fan of scary movies. "I'm not a huge horror buff." Turns out he's more of a comedy guy. His most watched film? *The Big Lebowski*.

Skarsgård's early education in movies began in the same spot as most: on the couch with Dad. The entire family is close, he emphasizes multiple times when we speak, but Skarsgård found more common ground with his father than with his mother when he was young. Also, by necessity, more space. "We're six kids," he says, "so you kind of pick what side of the bed of your parents you sleep on. And my sister's a year and a half younger than me, so I got pushed off from Mom's side fairly early onto Dad's."

Skarsgård doesn't seem entirely comfortable discussing his mother—one of the few subjects he's reticent about. "My mom's gone through a lot," he says tentatively as we make our way around Belvedere Castle—which, by happy accident, we've stumbled across in our wanderings. "I'm very proud of who she is today. She's devoted her life to help recovering alcoholics and addicts, which she's gone through herself." He doesn't elaborate further.

So what were the Skarsgårds watching back in the day? Sergio Leone westerns, Kurosawa creations, Charlie Chaplin films, and Coppola's catalog. All of it. Stellan had taste, but he also had rules. And as for what was on the screens at home, he was adamant: "Whenever violence was romanticized

gård country home. "Christmas is like twenty-five people," he says proudly. "That's just immediate family." He jokes: "We'll have to get our own little island and call it Skarsisland in the future."

He also very clearly enjoys being a dad. Throughout our time together, he peppers his answers to non-family-related questions with references to his daughter. The way she used to tuck in all her stuffed animals for bed before she could even talk, for example, is proof to him that women are wired to be more empathetic than men. He mentions how her arrival helped him put down permanent physical roots. And one of the first questions he asked me, in the lobby of his hotel before we set out for our walk, was if I have kids of my own.

He's a deep thinker as well. *The Crow* costar FKA Twigs says Skarsgård spent most of his off days during production "training and contemplating." And he acknowledges that the mysteries of the universe frequently disrupt his mind. "I have obsessively thought about those things," he says. Littler pause. Bigger smile. "I'll let you know when I have found the answers."

THERE IS A HEARTY, VOCAL CONTINGENT OF FANS WHO BELIEVE *The Crow* should have never—and I mean never—been made for the screen again. Partly because director Alex Proyas's 1994 outing rocks. High-octane and surreal, it stood apart from anything else that had ever hit theaters. But the protective veil is cast more because it was both the breakout film for



Trench coat and tank by **Hermès**; trousers by **Junya Watanabe Man**; badge pins by **Werkstatt:München**.

Brandon Lee (son of martial-arts icon Bruce Lee) and the role that ended his life. Then twenty-eight years old, the actor was killed in an on-set accident when a prop gun malfunctioned.

Skarsgård echoes the sentiment that the movie's marketing team has shared elsewhere: This is not a remake of the earlier film but instead a second adaptation of the graphic novel. The 1994 movie had a straightforward revenge plot. The 2024 version, helmed by Sanders (*Snow White & the Huntsman*), is at its core a love story. Not a rosy one, though. "It's romantic in the same sense as a Cure song," says the director. "There's a melancholy there."

Audiences see Skarsgård's Eric and Twigs's Shelly meet, fall in love, and tumble into love before she comes to her gruesome end. Only then does his quest begin. It wrestles with doubt and desperately claws at life's big questions. *Why are we here? What happens to us when we die? What would you give up to save the one you love?*

That's all true—I've seen it—but have you been online lately? None of that will temper fans and critics who want to stack the two films and the two leading men against each other.

Director Chad Stahelski, who worked with Skarsgård on *John Wick: Chapter 4* ("I think he's my best villain ever," says the filmmaker of the Marquis), has a unique lens to offer on *The Crow*. He and Lee were close friends and ran in the same circle of actors and stuntmen. And when Lee died, with much of the film not yet finished, Proyas called on Stahelski to stand in for Lee in a number of scenes. (It's a common misconception, Stahelski says, that he was involved as Lee's stuntman from the start.)

"I had to sit for weeks with Alex Proyas and watch all of the footage," he recalls. "Face replacement was not very big at the time—you had to mimic everything." Painstakingly, and very much while in mourning, they finished the work.

How did you feel when you found out the movie was coming back—and that Skarsgård was playing Eric? "When I heard Bill was doing it, I was like, 'That's

was the sheer scale of the actor's commitment.

Skarsgård arrived to set directly from another shoot and did four straight demanding months. No complaints. Very few off days. And then, "on the last night of shooting, I said to him—we had this agricultural tank filled with black syrup—and I said, 'Bill, I know it's eleven at night and it's not very warm in there, but would you get in that oil and thrash around and scream and come up out of that oil as if you're possessed?'" Sanders says.

What do you think happened next?

SKARSGÅRD MAY BE AMBIVALENT ABOUT THE ENDING OF *THE CROW*, but he visibly brightens when speaking about *Nosferatu*, director Robert Eggers's reimagining of the infamous 1922 silent picture. That film, an unauthorized adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and a groundbreaking work in the horror genre, starred Max Schreck as the Transylvanian monster. It changed the course of cinema entirely—both through its influence on future directors and by helping to solidify future copyright laws. When the new film arrives on Christmas with Skarsgård in the role of the famously undead count, it will be the culmination of an eight-plus-year hunt for the lead.

He first met Eggers right after the director debuted *The Witch*, which Skarsgård loved, in 2015. Real life, it turned out, was even better than the movies for the actor. "It's kind of like a date, right?" says Skarsgård, recalling the meeting. "That's the closest thing I can compare it to. You get a crush on someone—you can't stop thinking about that person. I've only had it a few times, but that was so true with Robert. It was like, 'Whatever this guy does, I just want to be a part of anything that this guy is making.'"

Eggers mentioned *Nosferatu* then, and Skarsgård was eager for basically any role. First, he read for Friedrich Harding, a German ship merchant and a supporting (human) male character. That didn't work, but he landed an offer for Thomas Hutter, the main protagonist. Great news. Anya Taylor-Joy was attached, and things were moving ahead—until they weren't.

Is the vampire he plays in *Nosferatu* sexy? "Hopefully you'll get a little bit attracted by it and disgusted by your attraction at the same time."

a good take.' " He adds, "I knew Bill was going to bring something different. Bill's got that ethereal nature that makes him feel out of this world, or from another planet or existence."

Back in Central Park, Skarsgård opens up about the fact that now, two years after filming wrapped, he feels a certain distance from the work. As with most topics, he is refreshingly candid.

That includes when discussing the ending of *The Crow*. I won't spoil what happens, but I will tell you that Skarsgård would have voted for a different conclusion. Why film it the way they did? It made the path for a sequel easier, his answer suggests. "I personally preferred something more definitive."

The film was shot in Prague over the course of about four months. Mainly at night. It was long and grueling but gratifying. The project marks Twigs's first lead role, and she fully credits Skarsgård with making the experience a rewarding one. "Working with Bill has changed the trajectory of my career, really," she says. "He gave me a lot of confidence. He was very tender with me."

And once Sanders got past the initial shock of Skarsgård's diet and daily intake ("He eats about a pound of raw meat," says the director. "He's like a kind of caged beast. Every meal, he'd order tartare"), the only surprise left

The movie fell apart and came together again more than once in the following years. Scheduling. Funding. Who knows what—that's showbiz. And when it finally came together for the last time—the time when it was really going to get made—Skarsgård was left wondering if he still had the role.

When news emerged that *Nosferatu* was ramping back up, "I wrote this long, pleading email to Robert," he remembers, amused by the memory. Referencing Hutter's fictional hometown, he adds, "I think the title was like *Wisborg in Flames* or something. I was just desperate to rekindle this thing and be a part of it."

"It was very earnest," Eggers says a week later over Zoom, equally pleased by the memory. "They say an expressionist artist doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve; they cut it out from their chests. It was raw, but it wasn't too much."

Even so, Eggers still went in another direction, casting Nicholas Hoult in the role of Hutter this go-round. Skarsgård didn't give up hope. There were other roles, right? Hell, he'd already read for Harding way back when. But that part soon went to Aaron Taylor-Johnson.

Skarsgård made peace with it. Sort of. " 'Robert and I are done!' " he jokes about how he felt at the time. "It was a fiery romance, but it never flourished!" Then, in a move that, to Skarsgård, felt like it came out of nowhere,



Eggers reached out and asked him to read for Count Orlok. When the creative team was originally casting for the vampire, men in their mid-forties were being considered. Skarsgård would have been twenty years shy of that. But as time passed—and as Eggers and his team spoke with others in contention for the iconic role—the vision for the character transformed.

Skarsgård's beauty was a boon, says the director. It might be nice, he thought, to have audiences actually be attracted to the monster. But it's not what nabbed him the part. Skarsgård read for the role multiple times. By self-tape. Over Zoom. In the studio with his hair slicked back and fake nails glued on. He tested out voices and sent them over piecemeal in voice notes. He did one makeup test, and then another. As Eggers puts it, that's when the light flicked on. "Somewhere in that second makeup test, I was like, 'He's become the character.' It was eerie to see in the footage. Anything he did, anywhere he turned or looked, you were like, 'He's got it.'"

Some eighteen months later, the cast, which had lost Anya Taylor-Joy but had gained Lily-Rose Depp, arrived in Prague to film. Skarsgård was comfortable there. He'd shot *The Crow* nearby and stayed at the same hotel for both productions. But this headspace was different. Darker. More sinister. He worked with an opera singer to bring his voice down to its lowest possible pitch and spent three to six hours every day in makeup and prosthetics. The set was serious. Tense, even. Skarsgård was largely isolated from the rest of the cast, during prep as well as during the shoot. He felt like the character deserved it. Demanded it. "It took its toll," he says now. "It was like conjuring pure evil. It took a while for me to shake off the demon that had been conjured inside of me."

The level of darkness that Skarsgård was able to channel was stunning, says Eggers. "I remember early on, him trying to talk to me about what it meant to be a dead sorcerer—and I'm into some pretty heavy occult shit,

but he was on a different level." Laughing, he adds, "I was like, 'This sounds accurate, but I don't know how to converse about this with any fluidity.'"

Orlok's look has, until now, been kept completely under wraps. And Skarsgård is careful to leave it that way in conversation. What can he share? "I do not think people are gonna recognize me in it," he reveals.

I have questions. Well, just one: *Is this vampire sexy?* Long pause. "He's gross," Skarsgård begins, slowly. "But it is very sexualized. It's playing with a sexual fetish about the power of the monster and what that appeal has to you. Hopefully you'll get a little bit attracted by it and disgusted by your attraction at the same time."

AS WE LEAVE BELVEDERE CASTLE BEHIND AND WALK BACK TO HIS HOTEL, Skarsgård returns to a common theme in our conversation. As much as he enjoys the moviemaking process, he doesn't care that much for the film industry and all that comes with it. Even acting sometimes gives him the ick. "There's something gross about it," he says.

But for now at least, it's all about the next role. From New York, he will head to Toronto, where he's filming *something*. "I don't want to spoil it," he teases. Maybe it's just a coincidence that a few days later, when I get Muschietti on the phone, he too is in Ontario's capital—which happens to be where both *It* movies were filmed. And earlier, when I'd asked Skarsgård if he would be willing to play Pennywise again, he offered only a sheepish "maybe" in reply. *Have there been discussions about when that may happen?* "Maybe."

What happens after Skarsgård finishes filming in Toronto is up in the air. Offers are coming and going. And while he's open to anything, there's really just one thing he wants. "I need time to refuel and figure things out before I embark on the next thing," he says. He could use a visit to Skarsisland, in other words, before he goes exploring again. 

This page: Coat, tank, and trousers
by **Junya Watanabe Man**; skull ring
by **the Great Frog**. Opposite: Trench
coat, tank, and trousers by **Prada**;
belt by **the Leather Man, NYC**.

Production by Boom
Productions.

Grooming by Kevin Ryan
for Ludlow Blunt, Williamsburg.

Skin care by Ginger Ryan.

Set design by Michael Sturgeon.

Tailoring by Todd Thomas.



what *i've* learned

Stephen King

AUTHOR; 76; BANGOR, MAINE

Interview by **ADRIENNE WESTENFELD**

- **FAME IS A PAIN IN THE ASS.** The older you get, the more of a pain in the ass it is. But you have to realize that it comes with the territory. It's just part of what you do.
- **THERE'S THIS OLD SPANISH SAYING:** "God says, 'Take what you want and pay for it.'" That's the case with being famous.
- **I KNEW A LOT** when I was seventeen. But since then, it's been a constant process of attrition.
- **YOU CAN'T THINK OF WRITING** as an adult pursuit or anything that's important. That's a good way to turn into a gas-bag and start to think that you're really fucking important. You're not. You just do your work.
- **I HAVE TO WORK EVERY DAY** because I have to keep it fresh. If you take a few days off, it all starts to look kind of tacky—like an old campaign poster that's running in the rain.
- **IT DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK.** I've got stories that just ram up against a brick wall. They're in my right desk drawer. I don't look in there.
- **IF IT'S A GOOD REVIEW,** it can be dismissed. If it's a bad review, well, then that's something you obsess over a little bit.
- **THE IMPORTANT THING ABOUT FAILING** is that it should always be a learning experience.
- **WHEN I HAVE A GOOD IDEA,** I just know. It's like if you have a bunch of cut-glass goblets set up and you're hitting them with a spoon. *Clunk, clunk, clunk.* And then one goes *ding.*
- **IN EVERY MARRIAGE,** after the shine is off, then you get down to the serious work of building a relationship. You can't let the sun go down on your anger. These all sound like fucking platitudes. They become platitudes for a reason.
- **BE THERE FOR YOUR KIDS.** Say yes. Say yes as much as you can.
- **WHAT WOULD I TELL** my twenty-year-old self? Stay away from dope and stay away from booze. Because you have a tendency to go too far.
- **I'VE BEEN IN RECOVERY** a day at a time for a long time now. All I know is what works for me: staying out of the wine aisle in Publix.
- **THEY SAY THAT YOU DON'T GO TO A WHOREHOUSE** to listen to the piano player, and if you hang around the barber-shop, sooner or later you're going to get your hair cut. So I try to stay away from temptation.
- **I LIKE TO USE** my imagination. I like to go for walks. I dig the world in general.
- **TEN PERCENT OF MY TWEETS** are political because every now and then, I just get so irritated about something. It doesn't change anybody's mind, but it's good to be able to say it. In the meetings that I go to, we say, "You have to claim your chair." Sometimes I feel like, yeah, I have to claim my chair.
- **THERE'S THIS SAYING** that if you're not a liberal in your teens, you don't have a heart, and if you're still a liberal in your twenties and thirties, you don't have a brain.
- **I THINK THAT, ACTUALLY,** if you're a liberal in your teens, you probably don't have a brain. And if you're not a liberal by the time you're in your thirties and forties, you don't have a heart.
- **IF YOU ASK WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY ACCIDENT,** it would be: Number one, stay on the sidewalk. I was walking in the country, and the guy came over the hill and hit me.
- **OTHER THAN THAT,** you learn about pain. But it doesn't do any good, because you forget. The body has a way of forgetting the trauma. I suffered a lot, and the writing helped me because it took me away. That's probably a healthy thing. You don't want to live your life in a defensive crouch.
- **I CAN COOK FISH** a thousand different ways, but I'm also one hell of a breakfast cook. I make a great cheese omelet.
- **I'D LIKE TO BE KNOWN** as somebody who died merry—who did his work as best as he could and was decent to other people.
- **I THINK WHAT PEOPLE WILL SAY IS** "This is the scary guy—the guy who wrote the horror novels." But I'd like to be known as somebody who was just a decent human being. ■



Stephen King is the best-selling author of more than seventy-five books; his latest, *You Like It Darker*, is in stores now.



heirs to the

Ewan Mitchell [+](#) Tom Glynn-Carney play brothers battling for power on the second season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* prequel, *House of the Dragon*. Off camera, they're keeping each other humble.
By Brady Langmann Photographs by Guy Aroch Styling by Nick Sullivan

throne



On Glynn-Carney, left: Suit (\$4,900) and shirt (\$1,550) by **Gucci**; Constellation Globemaster watch (\$7,900) by **Omega**; necklaces, bracelets, and earring, Glynn-Carney's own (worn throughout). On Mitchell, right: Suit (\$4,800) and shirt (\$850) by **Gucci**.

Opposite: Suit (\$6,095) and sunglasses (\$813) by **Brunello Cucinelli**; lock pendant (\$14,200) by **Tiffany & Co.**





Jacket, trousers (\$1,500), shirt (\$1,100), and sunglasses (\$460), **Celine Homme by Hedi Slimane**; High Jewelry chain bracelet and signet ring (\$20,000) by **David Yurman**.

Opposite: Suit (\$3,300), shirt (\$700), and sunglasses (\$550) by **Dior Men**; loafers (\$1,995) by **Christian Louboutin**; socks (\$31) by **Falke**; watch (\$23,700) by **Vacheron Constantin**.





THE HOUSE OF THE DRAGON BROTHERS ARE having a smoke outside their hotel, looking like the most famous British rockers who never existed. There's Ewan Mitchell, twenty-seven, whose six-foot frame is hidden by a baggy black hoodie and sweatpants. At his side is Tom Glynn-Carney, twentynine, slightly shorter, looking proper as heck: newsboy cap, cords, the works. They're so perfectly, lazily, and hilariously draped against the Soho Grand's brick exterior that I expect someone to ask for an autograph thinking they're Cambridge Asylum (my name for their fictional band), not Aemond and Aegon Targaryen.

We meet up inside the hotel's restaurant and order drinks—beers for Tom and me, just a Coke for Ewan. Before we get to their hit *Game of Thrones* prequel (season 2 debuts June 16), we address the latest sign of the apocalypse: the magnitude 4.8 earthquake that hit the New York City area earlier that day. “We did not feel that,” says Mitchell with genuine FOMO. “We were getting dressed. Maybe because we were on one leg putting on trousers.”

“Maybe we were hovering for a moment,” adds Glynn-Carney. “*High on life*, baby.”

In this alt-reality-Oasis thing the two have going on, Mitchell is the shy, sensitive one. (“I’ve heard online that I’ve got a pussycat face or something. I do something with my lips. *I pout*.”) And Glynn-Carney—who until recently was actually the lead singer of an indie folk band called Sleep Walking Animals—is the guy who’ll match you Guinness for Guinness. (When the server hands me a beer: “Oh, here we go. Here we go. This is what you need. Come on. Hey!”)

The two onscreen siblings are in town from England for a weekend of early *House of the Dragon* promotion. They’re taking over leading-men duties for the HBO series, which is a *Succession*-esque tale focused on the Targaryen family, told nearly two hundred years before the events of *Game of Thrones*. (Glynn-Carney: “Not that it needs any advertising at all, but *Game of Thrones* is fucking amazing.”) Season 1 of *House of the Dragon* largely followed younger versions of their characters (played by different actors), the never-not-bickering brothers Aegon and Aemond. The final three episodes reintroduced the siblings at ages 21 and 18, respectively: Aegon (Glynn-Carney), the reluctant misfit chosen to sit on the Iron Throne, and Aemond (Mitchell), the cunning younger brother who wants to usurp him.

“In the last three episodes of season 1, I presented a character that was entirely black,” says Mitchell. “In season 2, I can’t wait to turn him gray.” And Aegon? “He comes into his own as an unpredictable live wire,” says Glynn-Carney. “He’s intensely ambitious and incapable of pursuing the things he sets for himself.”

Keep in mind: *House of the Dragon* is based on

George R. R. Martin’s *Fire & Blood*, so die-hards already know what happens to Aegon and Aemond. Or do they? “The books are the foundation of where we’re going narratively, but things are tweaked,” says Glynn-Carney. “It’s the Bible, but it’s also not. The writers of our show are brilliant and should be given credit for their creation. George R. R. Martin should be given credit for his creation. But they’re not the same thing.”

So how long should fans expect Mitchell and Glynn-Carney to don their Targaryen locks? “We’ve been told at least twenty-five years,” Glynn-Carney says drolly. “No, fuck. It’s all up in the air, mate.” Says Mitchell: “I’m speaking from an angle of not knowing anything about the plan, but I highly doubt they’ll do what they did with *Game of Thrones* and carry on after the book finishes.” He adds, “I think our story will run its course and everyone will move on.”

You get the sense that these two—as happy as they are to beef with each other in Westeros—don’t want to do it forever. There should be no shortage of projects to choose from post-*Dragon*. Glynn-Carney’s breakout role was in a little film called *Dunkirk*, and we know that Christopher Nolan loves repeat collaborators. Mitchell is no stranger to working with auteurs himself; the man is such a chameleon that you probably didn’t even realize he was in Emerald Fennell’s *Saltburn*, screaming, “FUCKIN’ ASK ME A SUM THEN!” at Barry Keoghan.

“I loved you in this knitwear in that film,” Glynn-Carney quips. “You can pull off a chunky knit.”

“I need to buy more of it. I just wear lots of Adidas, whatever that says.”

“Satan. That’s what that says. He’s a satanist.”

This’ll sound like bullshit, but it rings true with these two: They’re simply happy to be here and grateful for the success that’s come their way so far. Mitchell thinks of it in terms of how he measures many things in life: by Great (but Slightly Cheesy) American Movie Moments. “*Good Will Hunting* is one of my top ten films,” he says. “I love that line that Ben Affleck says to Matt Damon: If you don’t do it for you, do it for me—because I’d give anything to have what you’ve got. My mates back home work in construction. There’s things that they have that I want and things that I have that they want.”

Glynn-Carney chimes in: “Checking your privilege, ain’t it?”

“You’ve got to check yourself to be grateful.”

As we wrap up around 8:00 P.M., Glynn-Carney and Mitchell ponder the next day’s official duties. (Glynn-Carney: “I just wish there was puppies involved.”) I ask if they’re heading to bed.

“It feels stupid to go to bed when you’re in Manhattan,” Glynn-Carney says. “But then again . . .”

“A shower would be nice!” Mitchell interjects.

“It’s a good start,” Glynn-Carney says. “A shower.” 🚿



Suit (\$6,095) and sunglasses (\$813) by **Brunello Cucinelli**; lock pendant necklace (\$14,200) by **Tiffany & Co.**

Opposite, on Glynn-Carney: Jacket and trousers by **Hermès**. On Mitchell: Jacket and trousers by **Brioni**; Signet ring (\$5,500) and band ring (\$850) by **De Beers**.

On Mitchell: Coat (\$3,495) and suit (\$3,295) by **Ralph Lauren Purple Label**; Laureato Evergreen watch (\$14,300) by **Girard-Perregaux**. On Glynn-Carney: Shirt (\$1,250) and trousers \$1,375) by **Loro Piana**; boots (\$965) by **Guidi**; Serpenti Viper ring (\$2,360) by **Bulgari**.









On Glynn-Carney: Jacket (\$4,300), trousers (\$1,025) and tank (\$750) by **Hermès**; sneakers (\$60) by **Vans**; Love necklace (\$2,710) by **Cartier**. On Mitchell: Jacket (\$6,440), trousers (\$2,080), and shirt (\$790) by **Brioni**; shoes (\$1,445) by **Christian Louboutin**.

Opposite: Jacket (\$3,695) by **Giorgio Armani**; T-shirt (\$85) by **ATM**; Naga Y necklace (\$1,995) by **John Hardy**.

Grooming by **Melissa DeZarate** using La Mer and Kevin Murphy. Tailoring by **Joseph Ting**. For store information see page 104.





the BEST BARS *in* AMERICA 2024

SOMETIMES YOU JUST WANT TO SETTLE IN. SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO call the audible, cancel the next meetup, ask the sitter to stay late, and get your friends to come to you, because you've found the place with an energy so perfect—exactly what you were looking for on that day, in that moment—that, really, could anything go up from here? ¶ More bars these days seem to be a complete package, like a nightlife one-stop shop. They can be a club if you want—you know, the kind you dance in. They can be the place where you order a bottle of Champagne and endless oysters. They can be a jazz lounge. They can be the place where you think you've stumbled on a garage party attended by the city's coolest people (in a city you didn't know had cool people). They can be that dimly lit vault where you and everyone else become someone else. ¶ Bars have always been that third place, the spot where you hang out—side work and home. But as we've discovered crisscrossing the country over the past twelve months to visit the new bars, they're doing that in more nuanced and varied ways than they have in a long time. ¶ It's not just about the drinks. Then again, it's never just about the drinks.

—KEVIN SINTUMUANG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOÃO CANZIANI

LEFT: Scenes from some of this year's best bars in America. We escaped with fiery and smoky cocktails at Paradise Lost; explored the depths of the martini at Tusk Bar and Tigre; settled in on the couch with friends and a bottle of wine at Parcelle; and experienced elegance with a twist at Portrait Bar, our favorite new hotel haunt.



RETURN *of the* LOUNGE

MARTINIS AND MUSIC. GLAMOUR AND VELVET. ALL YOU NEED FOR A BIG NIGHT OUT.



Tigre

NEW YORK CITY

► This intimate Lower East Side bar is like the slingshot that launches you into the glorious night. It's the Golden Snitch of a good time: a compact gilded room lined with undulating booths and bodies undulating on them, bathed in a low light, reached through a long hallway and purgatorial door. Once inside, everyone is serving looks, from the bartender to the waiter, a dead ringer for Jesus but hotter, who sa-shays in a cream silk pantsuit, holding trays of cocktails much better than they need be. (Tigre is from the Maison Premiere team, no slouches when it comes to bars.) The menu, writ on gold paper, features cocktails with lesser-known agave-based spirits like the

Prickly Pear (bacanora) and Agave (raicilla). Down a few and you'll emerge from the den neither knowing the time nor caring all that much, for the night and all its adventures await. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Cigarette martini, a very good smoky cocktail made with Empirical Spirits Charlene McGee, Truman vodka, and Cap Corse vermouth. —Joshua David Stein

Dawn Club

SAN FRANCISCO

► People not from San Francisco always seem to ask me these days: How's San Francisco doing? And my response is always the same: It's going through a tough moment. But people like Brian Sheehy are what make a city like this everlasting. Sheehy is the man be-



and enter the handsome room with its illuminated back bar, you know you've stepped into something special. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Hot Seven, a take on the Last Word that subs rye for gin and has a dash of pineapple juice to create a foamy texture after it's shaken. —Omar Mamoon

Medium Cool

MIAMI BEACH

► The name says it all. In South Beach, which teems with hot spots that are just a little too clubby, Medium Cool straddles the line between world-class cocktail bar and a place where you can listen to live jazz or a DJ set and, if the mood strikes, get up and dance. And you probably will. MC could easily kill it as just another bar with a doorman and velvet banquettes, but the fact that it is low-key one of the best cocktail bars in America (and not in a snooty sense—it has a shots menu) makes it a must-stop in Miami. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Piña Colada Daiquiri, a blend of two of the most essential warm-weather drinks. —K. S.



HOME OF THE
OG MARTINI

Where was the dry martini invented? *Many claim Times Square's Knickerbocker Hotel.* With the landmark's new Charlie Palmer Steak IV, you can now get the original version of the quintessential drink at its birth-place.

TOP LEFT: Scenes from Tigre on New York's Lower East Side. BOTTOM: Downtown San Francisco's Dawn Club has live jazz every night.

HIT *the* ESCAPE BUTTON

YEARNING TO FLEE FROM REALITY FOR A BIT, LIKE TO ANOTHER GALAXY? THAT'S WHAT THESE BARS ARE FOR.

Paradise Lost

NEW YORK CITY

► You are welcomed with the ol' secret-bar shtick: Discreet door. Buzz to open. But this isn't some dimly lit drink temple. It's much weirder: a tropical bar with punk sensibilities (this is the East Village, after all) and ultra-nerd cocktail ambitions dressed up in red

lights and bamboo-clad booths, plus lots of fish nets and trippy vintage paraphernalia. There are flights of esoteric, hard-to-find rums that come in mini treasure chests and a cocktail list of more than twenty entries that range from twists on classics like the piña colada to drinks that push the boundaries of tropical cocktails.

WHAT YOU'RE HAVING: The Damnboo, a refreshing take on the bamboo cocktail with fino sherry, umeshu plum sake, caraway, and aloe. —K. S.

Liquid Diet

LAS VEGAS

► Visit Vegas enough and unless you are a casino die-hard who thrives on oxy-

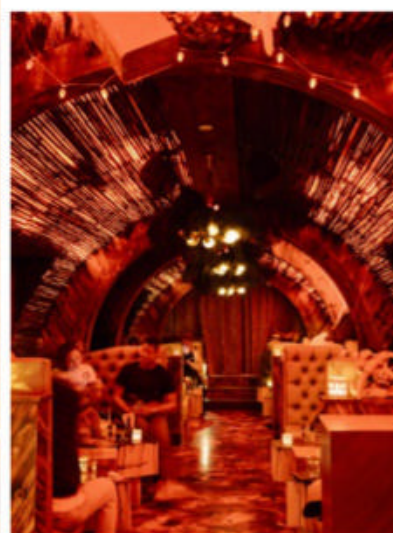
genated air and cigarette smoke, you'll need to peel away from the Strip to reset a bit, to feel something more real. There's no shortage of real Vegas, but nothing makes you believe you've wandered into an impromptu garage party like Liquid Diet. Located down an alley in an old mechanics shop in the Gateway District, with the glow of the Stratosphere a few blocks away, this is unlike any other Vegas scene you may have encountered before: thrifted furniture, loud music, and strange yet delightful culinary cocktails whose names are scribbled on pieces of cardboard hung up above the bar. Despite the makeshift vibe, the cocktails are some of the

most creative and dialed-in you'll find in Vegas. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The date old-fashioned. A classic made just a bit more complex with a date infusion. —K. S.

La Dolce Vita

BEVERLY HILLS

► A taste of the good life comes in many forms at La Dolce Vita. Sure, there's the hearty Italian red-sauce fare coming from the kitchen—a bone-in veal Parmesan larger than your face and giant plates of vongole generous on the clams—but these are just items that allow you to imbibe more. Sit at the burgundy-colored booth with white tablecloths where Frank Sinatra once drank or hang out at the bar and take in the see-and-be-seen nostalgic sixties Hollywood scene: the dark and dimly lit brick-walled room, the leopard-spotted carpet, servers in black bow ties and cream-colored suits tending to exceedingly well-dressed celebs (or those who look like celebs). Is that Dua Lipa or does it just look like Dua Lipa? Take another sip of your Gibson and you'll realize that it doesn't really matter. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** A Gibson—this silky-smooth version is one of our Best Martinis in America for a reason. —O. M.



New York's Paradise Lost is a tropical wonderland with a punk sensibility and lots of things that are lit on fire.

The COCKTAIL DENS

THESE PLACES PROVE THAT INSPIRATION CAN STILL BE FOUND IN A SHAKER.



Martiny's

NEW YORK CITY

► The name is not a typo. The Gramercy carriage house that houses this Tokyo-meets-Manhattan-style bar was once owned by sculptor Philip Martiny. And yes, you'll get a lovely martini, but go beyond the straight-up classics and try the Grand Martiny, a delicate dance of elderflower liqueur, gin, sherry, and cognac. The menu feels like a high-wire act, but it all stays afloat courtesy of a team

led by Takuma Watanabe, from the original Angel's Share, the bar that started N. Y. C.'s cocktail revolution. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Anything daring. With karaage and caviar, of course. —K. S.

Sip & Guzzle

NEW YORK CITY

► Little Cornelia Street always seems to be humming now with the arrival of this all-star collaboration: Employees Only alum Steve



Schneider mixes up deft but highly approachable drinks at Guzzle on the upper level, and Shingo Gokan, longtime beverage director at Angel's Share, helms Sip downstairs, a space that echoes the interior of an Edo-period naval ship. It's a bit of "party up top and business on the bottom" but a big night out no matter which way you cut it. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Sip's Wagyu old-fashioned. Bourbon, peanut butter, and Wagyu-beef fat—as delightful as it is strange sounding. —K. S.

Refuge

HOUSTON

► With Anvil, bartender/owner Bobby Heugel helped put Houston on the cocktail map by introducing a big, fun spot that actually made killer cocktails. Refuge is Anvil's sophisticated but not pretentious cousin, located upstairs. A replica of Havana's El Floridita neon sign welcomes you. But the rest of the space is dark, energized by hip-hop and drinks that feel classic rather than trendy, even though this might be the first time you're tasting Oaxacan rum in a daiquiri. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Greenhorn, a bright-green drink that proves Midori is a worthy liqueur. —K. S.

Equal Measure

BOSTON

► A portrait of Stanley Tucci shaking a Negroni greets you, as a nod to the name of the joint: The Negroni is the most famous equal-parts drink, but tried-and-true cocktail folks know that you certainly don't shake it. Sometimes you just need to do you, though. And that's the spirit of this spot from revered Boston bartender Jackson Cannon, who helmed Eastern Standard, one of the greatest high-volume bars in the country. (It closed but is now back, located down the hall from EM.) You can get martini riffs or simply order a pilsner. But with this level of drink making, opt for the cocktails. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Down the Rabbit Hole. It'll change your mind about carrot greens. —K. S.



COCKTAIL OF THE YEAR

THE TOMATO TREE AT SIP & GUZZLE

Tomato water is one of the cocktail world's most subtle ingredients. It can get battered into oblivion, but play with it gently, with ingredients like Roku gin and rice shochu, as Sip's Shingo Gokan does, and you'll get the *essence of a late-summer dinner in a glass.*

TOP: Martini riffs and scallops at Martiny's. LEFT: The bar at Sip.

ERIC MEDSKER (SIP & GUZZLE, TOMATO TREE)

ALL DAY *at the* WINE BAR

A BOTTLE, SOME SNACKS, AND LOTS OF TIME TO SPARE? THIS IS THE GOOD LIFE.

Nine Bar

CHICAGO

► Head to the back room of the Moon Palace restaurant—family run and serving the community since 1995—and you will find the neon-lit Nine Bar, from Lily Wang and Joe Briglio. It serves mapo fries and drinks that lean into the ingredients of the neighborhood (e.g., Calpico, Szechuan peppercorns, plums). The *Blade Runner* vibe is heavy here, but the DJ and the angular, big-flavor cocktails keep the overall atmosphere light. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Mahjong Money, made with mezcal, Japanese whisky, matcha, honey, lemongrass, and ginger. —K. S.

Bar Next Door

LOS ANGELES

► In La La Land, new drinking joints often take two forms: high-gloss, social-media-ready hellholes or wannabe social clubs. Both are awful! (And both often serve terrible drinks.) Then there's Bar Next Door. This Sunset Strip establishment whispers Golden Age Hollywood with art-deco decor and cognac-hued, leather-wrapped furniture. The menu is divided into old standbys and new takes that combine seemingly incongruent ingredients like chlorophyll, Bénédictine, and Japanese whisky into highly sippable elixirs. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Olive Drive, a twist on the vesper with savory olive brine and Thai chile. Daunting? Maybe. But after one taste, it's true love. —Daniel Dumas

Parcelle

NEW YORK CITY

► Parcelle looks less like a wine bar and more like a living room decorated with European modernist furniture, including a snaking de Sede couch and Gio Ponti chairs in a shade of emerald green similar to the exterior of this Chinatown spot. On the walls hang embroideries of mushrooms and other flora—it's a sensual room. The ever-changing wine list is curated by sommelier and owner Grant Reynolds. There's an excellent by-the-glass list, but so many of the bottles are priced so well that this really is one of the best places in the city to settle in and get some refined bar snacks like uni toast and Kaluga caviar sliders. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** A grower Champagne. You'll almost always find a gem here for under \$100. —K. S.

Light Years

HOUSTON

► Sometimes when I travel, I don't want to go out to a bar—I'd rather chill at a friend's house with wine. When I'm in Houston specifically, that friend is Steve Buechner. His house is stacked with the good stuff. Okay, fine—I've met Steve only once, and he made me pay for the wine. But his natural-wine bar and bottle shop, Light Years, is located in a house in Montrose, and if you go, he'll treat you like a friend and allow you to linger as long as you want (or until last call). **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Anything your new BFF Steve is pouring behind the bar. —O. M.



Parcelle feels more like a posh living room than it does a wine bar. Part of it is the furniture. Part of it is the caviar sliders.

Sauvage Wine Bar and Shop

PHOENIX

► The Helen Anderson House was built for the widow of an insurance-company organizer. Today, all the cool kids in town throw natty-wine-fueled dance parties in her living room late into the night. The English cottage revival home has housed various businesses over the years, like a café and a gift shop, but make no mistake: Its current incarnation is definitely the most fun. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** A glass of something effervescent (like a pét-nat) to help you party all night. —O. M.

The DISCREET CHARM of the HOTEL BAR

SEMISECRET NOOKS CARVED OUT FROM THE LOBBY CAN MAKE FOR SOME QUIET MAGIC.



Portrait Bar

NEW YORK CITY

► Portrait Bar, in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, stands as a shining example of what can transpire when people really know what they're doing. The drinks and the food reflect a quiet but confident virtuosity. You may think a martini has no use for aguardiente and cherry-bark vanilla bitters, but that's only because you haven't yet sipped veteran barman Darryl Chan's Barrio Getsemani, informed by the flavors and fragrances of Cart-

agena. You may think you don't need any bar snacks fancier than a bowl of nuts, but that's only because you haven't yet nibbled on vet-

eran chef Andrew Carmellini's crispy oysters with a celery-root rémoulade or his tuna tartare tucked into nori that deftly crackles in



Simmer Down

WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

► Yes, Wilmington. In the Quoin, a little hotel housed in a former bank, you'll discover Simmer Down in the old money room. Today, it's a richly detailed space with a green-marble bar; a surrealist, hand-painted mural with whimsical nods to the area; and swivel chairs with animals in a fairy-tale setting. The drinks are creative, but there's nothing wrong with heading straight for the martini. There's a whiff of Bemelmans here—who knew Delaware could be this cool? **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Gravy Train, a very twisted rum and coke. —K. S.

your teeth. The cocktails pay tribute to cities around the world, from Oaxaca to Kolkata to Seoul, and the darkness of the partly hidden room has such a calming effect that you might try to hold on to your table for hours as you let your palate hopscotch around the globe. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Everything. —Jeff Gordinier

Collins at the Fontainebleau

LAS VEGAS

► For the most part, the ubiquitous Vegas lobby bar, the first place you encounter when you enter the hotel/casino, can feel a bit generic—just something to hit in between rounds of blackjack. That's not the case with Collins, a circular bar with a bit of Miami-meets-Vegas glam. (Think marble, brass, velvet, and dim mood lighting.) You're greeted with silver trays of olives and Marcona almonds, and you can throw down and get caviar service if you're in the high-roller spirit. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Hotel Nacional Special, a forgotten classic that's an even more tropical riff on the daiquiri. —K. S.

Punch Room at the Edition Tampa

TAMPA

► Fitting for Tampa, with its history of pirates and privateers dating back to the seventeenth century, is a bar that leans into the more sophisticated spirits of the Caribbean. But this is a swank Edition, so you won't find kitschy tropical tropes here. The lush room is a fusion of azure and chartreuse—settle in and explore. The drinks are delicate and revelatory; they're tropical, but you'll want to dress up for them. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** Ziggy's Punch, which evokes eating jerk chicken on the beach. —K. S.

TOP: Portrait Bar's Darryl Chan garnishing a cocktail. BOTTOM: The chartreuse, dark-wood, and azure lushness that is the Punch Room.

OYSTERS UP!

BRINY BIVALVES AND ELEGANT DRINKS ARE AN UNSTOPPABLE COMBINATION.

Tusk Bar

NEW YORK CITY

► Tusk Bar bills itself as a raw bar, but that might not register at first. Located through the lobby of the Evelyn Hotel, the space resembles more of a jazz-age salon than a place where lots of shucking is happening. There are oysters, yes, but the menu is from chefs Jeremiah Stone and Fabián von Hauske Valtierra of Wildair, so you'll want the pillowy panisse, the live-scallop crudo, and that decadent Wagyu-steak sandwich. And it's a bar, too. Tristan Brunel's drinks are delightfully off-kilter: The old-fashioned has a hint of sesame, and the Bloody Mary is seasoned with fermented chile.

WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:

The mini martinis with an oyster shooter. What a way to start things off. —K. S.

Traveling Mercies

AURORA, COLORADO

► Sometimes the best bars are in the most unexpected places. Exhibit A: Traveling Mercies, a cocktail and oyster bar tucked away on the top floor of a food hall/marketplace in Aurora, a suburb twenty minutes east of Denver. On one side of the low-ceilinged room is a row of barstools looking out on the expanse (the room was once an observation deck for an airport runway); on the opposite side is the back bar, where bar manager Matt Baczor is stirring bone-dry martinis in one hand while shaking up potent daiquiris in the other;



to his right, oysters are being shucked, swiftly and deftly. You may debate whether daiquiris or martinis go better with oysters. There are no losers in this

argument. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** A salty sake-infused oyster shooter to start, a couple bone-dry sherry-and-gin martinis, a dozen oysters, and an ice-cold shrimp cocktail before you head downstairs to sister restaurant Annette for your main meal. —O. M.

Little's Oyster Bar

HOUSTON

► Despite the name, Little's Oyster Bar is definitely more of a restaurant, but the bar itself is ample and

the drinks are too good not to consider this a place where you'd want to make a night out of bubbly, martinis, and seafood. There are five Champagnes by the glass, and the cocktails, by Oliver Brooks, are the right kind of light and bright accompaniments to both the Houston heat and a plateau of oysters, blue crab, and gulf shrimp. **WHAT YOU'RE HAVING:** The Windward Isle. Imagine a Hotel Nacional cocktail turned into a martini and this is what you get here. Sophisticated yet tropical. —K. S.



COCKTAIL OF THE YEAR

MIGNONETTE GIBSON AT TUSK BAR

Just a few drops of mignonette into an icy-cold martini (from the freezer) and you have an elevated, gourmet dirty. *Warning:* You might end up doing this to all your martinis at raw bars from here on in.

TOP: Tusk Bar's mini martinis with an oyster sidecar. BOTTOM: Bartender Tristan Brunel throwing his riff on the Bloody Mary.



Shirt (\$1,350), necklace (\$2,840), and earring by Louis Vuitton Men's; boxers by Schostal Originals.

Inspired by Hawaii and Hong Kong, Pharrell made a collection for Louis Vuitton that's good for the beach, the boat, and the bar

By *Jonathan Evans* Photographs by *Jason Kibbler* Styling by *Alfonso Fernández Navas*



Louis Vuitton trunk with all clothing and accessories by Louis Vuitton Men's.

Tank, shorts (\$1,210), and hat (\$665) by **Louis Vuitton Men's**.

It's more than five thousand miles from Honolulu to Victoria Harbour. In between, it's open ocean, the odd pinprick of an island punctuating all that blue. The distance is imposing.

Unless you're Pharrell Williams. Hawaii and Hong Kong may seem far removed from each other—culturally and geographically—but Pharrell doesn't see it that way. Travel. The sea. The inevitable mash-up of people and the perspectives that come with them. They pull the two together, and they're exactly what Pharrell explores in his latest collection for Louis Vuitton, in which nautical themes, surf-inspired styling, and bold prints meet upscale fabrications and city-ready silhouettes. It works, especially if you're the type of guy who catches a wave in the morning and a private jet in the afternoon.

This is no coincidence. As a musician, a producer, and—since early 2023—the men's creative director of one of the biggest fashion labels on the planet, Pharrell is a specialist in melding disparate ideas and identities and transforming them into something greater than the sum of their parts. People, places, and what they mean to each other emotionally are at the forefront of his work.

His debut collection at Louis Vuitton drew a line between his hometown of Virginia Beach and his newly adopted base in Paris, taking American icons like the varsity jacket and adding intricate “Lovers”-themed embroidery to the back, a nod to Virginia's slogan. (It's “for lovers,” as you surely know.) This time around, the vision has evolved. There are the breezy styles—Bermuda shorts in bold prints, often with matching shirts—you'd expect to find beachside. There are nautical nods, like double-breasted suits and blazers with brass-circled buttons. And there are items destined for downtown, like streamlined leather jackets and dark denim with the iconic Vuitton monogram. But it's when sand and sea come together—as they do on standout pieces like high-waisted flared trousers emblazoned with a bright pink tropical print—that you see the throughline of Pharrell's overarching project. The search for a common thread is at the core of everything.

Because above all else, Pharrell understands that clothing is a means of cultural communication in our shared journey. And yes, you'll also look very cool along the way. ■



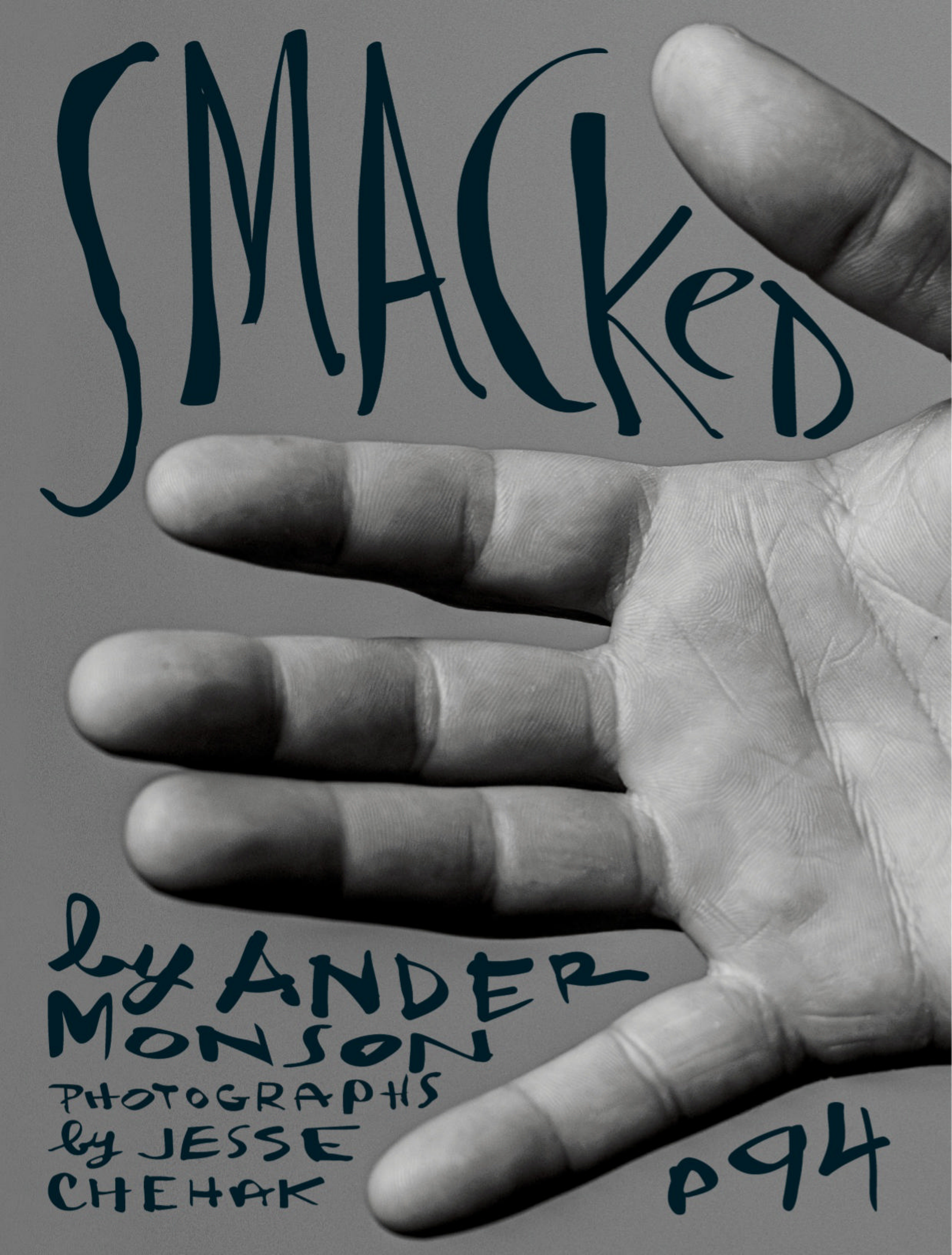


Jacket (\$3,050), tank, trousers (\$1,590), loafers (\$1,730), belt, necklace (\$700), and earring by **Louis Vuitton Men's**.

Opposite, top: Tank and trousers (\$1,470) by **Louis Vuitton Men's**; Volt ring (\$4,050) and V-ring (\$1,940) by **Louis Vuitton Fine Jewelry**; Tambour watch (\$26,500) by **Louis Vuitton**. Bottom: Leather jacket (\$5,750), shirt (\$1,840), shorts (\$1,350), necklace (\$2,840), socks, and earring by **Louis Vuitton Men's**.

Hair by Dennis Lanni using Dyson Pro Tools. Grooming by Devra Kinery using Mario Badescu. Tailoring by Todd Thomas.

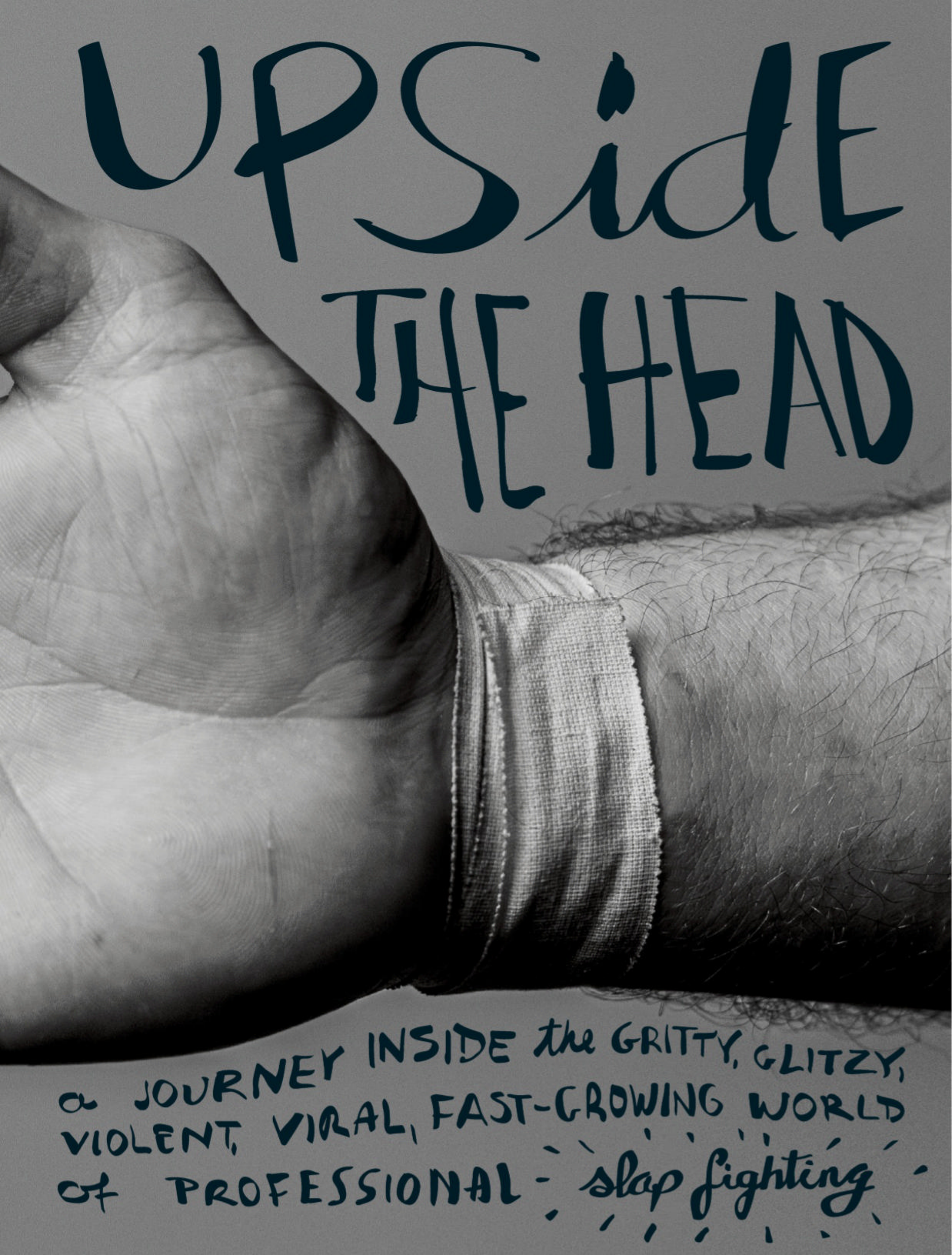
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by ANDER
MONSON

PHOTOGRAPHS
by JESSE
CHEHAK

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UPSIDE THE HEAD

a JOURNEY INSIDE the GRITTY, GLITZY,
VIOLENT, VIRAL, FAST-GROWING WORLD
of PROFESSIONAL - *slap fighting* -

THE

IMAGE THAT I CAN'T FORGET—THE ONE THAT TRULY PULLS ME INTO THE SAVAGE, surreal, and ridiculously compelling world of professional slap fighting—is the open hand of heavy-weight champion Damien “the Bell” Dibbell smashing into the giant bearded face of Ryan “the King of Kings” Phillips in slow motion. In the moment, I can’t tell whether my horror or pleasure is greater. Phillips’s eyes are closed, all 255 pounds of him anticipating the blow, hoping to endure it so he can return fire. He can’t move to evade the slap. That’s not allowed in this relatively new, super-fast-growing combat sport. Flinching is a foul—spiritually, the greatest foul in slap fighting—and the penalty is that your opponent gets an extra chance to smash you in the face. So you just have to take the blow. Dibbell’s slap takes maybe a second to deliver in real time. Phillips drops—whatever was him, gone at least briefly—and his body crumples to the ground.

It’s the replay, caught with super-slo-mo cameras, that makes it exactly the kind of weird I like: We see the hand approaching the face and then the impact. *BAM!* Phillips’s face is briefly displaced off his skull, his neck skin stretching, his face in this moment deformed like a rubber mask—that’s how unlike a face it looks!—and then suddenly it snaps back on. And in that extended instant we see the light going out. His face is almost peaceful as he falls in the aftermath of such a sudden blast of pain. The clip ends and we don’t see what happens after.

This is the money shot that Power Slap—the newer of the two American slap-fighting leagues, the one with the vastly higher budget and bigger footprint—has perfected. It’s shocking. It’s dumb. It’s fun. It’s nuts. It’s barbaric. And it’s brief, so it’s extremely shareable online, which is part of the point. In an age of the unreal and the fake, the AI-doctored and the dubiously sourced, slap fighting—a sport in which two men stand over a pedestal or a barrel and take turns slapping each other and being slapped—is indisputably really freaking real. It’s so real, in fact, and seems so simple that it almost feels like it can’t be. *No way, you think. They’re not actually just doing this. Shouldn’t somebody stop them? This is awesome!*

Most articles incorrectly trace slap fighting back to a 2019 video from a Russian strongman competition that went viral. But they’re wrong, at least according to JT Tilley, CEO of SlapFIGHT Championship (SFC), the original slap-fighting league, which continues as an underground, more intimate alternative to Power Slap. Tilley tells me that he started slap fighting as a rules-based sport four years earlier, in 2015, after he saw a viral video from Lubbock, Texas.

In the video, taken at an Ink Masters Tattoo Convention, set in what looks like a high school gym, two unsvelte dudes square off over a picnic table covered with a taped-on red tablecloth. A slightly smaller guy in a hat slaps the face of a big dude with his back to the camera, but not hard enough to do much damage. As an announcer on the stage hypes up the crowd, the big dude returns the slap, knocking the smaller guy out. He goes limp immediately from the blow; the crowd goes absolutely apeshit.



Far left: Ryan “the King of Kings” Phillips enters the octagon in Las Vegas before his Power Slap heavy-weight title fight. Near left: The moment he was KO’d by the champ, Damien “the Bell” Dibbell. Top right: Wildman connects with FPS on his way to winning a decision at SlapFIGHT 420 in Oklahoma City. Bottom right: The crowd at SlapFIGHT 420 reacts to the action.



SCHIAFFO LLC (POWER SLAP)



The comments below the Lubbock video outline the conflict that continues to rage around—and not coincidentally help spread—slap fighting: a contrast of thrilled, jacked-up smack talk versus “We’re close to landing men on Mars, yet this exists.”

It was after seeing that video and the response online, says Tilley, that he decided to “invent” slap fighting as a proper sport. That meant giving it shape and rules. And also trying to make it safe—by which he means safer relative to what it was at the time, which was a total free-for-all. The underground videos he was watching online were wild and compelling, sure. But he remembers thinking, *Somebody’s going to die out there*. So Tilley worked out a simple set of rules and the format. SFC started streaming its first events in 2017, and from there it grew.

The sport began to catch on overseas, including in Eastern Europe. A couple years after Tilley launched SFC, he was asked to consult with an unregulated Polish slapping show called Punch-Down. Tilley says he told the organizers that they needed to incorporate his safety rules to protect the fighters. They didn’t. And shortly after that, someone did die. In 2021, Artur “Waluś” Walczak, a Polish bodybuilder, suffered a stroke in Punch-Down 5 and died in the hospital. People freaked

SlapFIGHT can’t match the speed and scale of Power Slap’s growth trajectory, but it still boasts a pretty robust global following. The SFC YouTube channel has some 250,000 subscribers, with more than 57 million views since it launched. Tilley claims that SFC has garnered more than 2.5 billion views globally across all platforms and says the league has been televised in Hungary, Switzerland, Germany, the South Pacific, Nigeria, and the Middle East. Its most recent event, says Tilley, was seen online by 500,000 people live.

Slap fighting is unsafe, but all combat sports are. This is why we watch them. Frankly, most contact sports are dangerous, points out Power Slap president Frank Lamicella, who was tapped by White to run the league. The proven connection between football and CTE doesn’t seem to be hurting the NFL, after all. Both Lamicella and Tilley say that slap fighting is safer than boxing or MMA. Lamicella, who happens to be a lawyer, rattles off a whole list of medical precautions his league takes. Power Slap errs on the side of safety, he says. “So far we’ve had zero positive CT scans and really a very low hospital-transport rate compared to other combat sports.” Plus, he points out, no one is being forced to compete in his sport. “We live in a country where it’s capitalism and

I should say before we get too deep into this: I’m not a fan of combat sports. I haven’t been in a fight since eighth grade. My contributions to my own pain threshold are distance running and lack of self-control when eating bags of chips. That is, I’m a bit of a glutton and definitely a wuss, which became super obvious watching these guys hit and take hits from one another. I have no interest in seeing how much pain I could take by being slapped. But I like watching men do crazy stuff. And *how* crazy it is, and in what ways, is what I wanted to find out, so I went to experience two slap-fighting events live: Power Slap 7 in Vegas and SlapFIGHT 420 in Oklahoma City.

HAVING A SENSATIONAL NAME IS A BIG PART of the showmanship in slap fighting, and the competitors at Power Slap very much delivered on this promise: Kainoa, Pretty Boy, the Kryptonian, Bodacious, the Joker, the Truth, Static, the Waterboy, Da Hawaiian Hitman, El Perro.

Seated behind the stage in the media row, I could see the whole impressive production coming together. Lights and music (“Sandstorm,” by Darude, and the Moby song from one of the *Bourne* movies), fog machines, spotlights, booming voice-overs. The fight took place in the UFC Apex, which

Slap fighting is unsafe, but ALL COMBAT SPORTS are. This is why *we watch them*.

out. PunchDown disappeared, and, briefly, so did every other slap-fighting organization except for SFC.

But the visceral appeal of slap fighting was too potent not to attract new competition. And soon it caught the eye of the unofficial king of combat sports himself. In 2022, Dana White, the long-time president and impresario of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), founded Power Slap in Vegas, based on SFC’s rules and even using some of its fighters. Power Slap held its first bouts in January 2023, debuting on the TV network TBS. The initial ratings were disappointing, however, so Power Slap moved exclusively online, where it has been booming ever since.

The metrics tell the story of slap fighting’s social-media popularity. From April 2023 to early May 2024, Power Slap’s YouTube subscribers jumped from 121,000 to 2.4 million and its Facebook followers more than doubled, from 1.6 million to 3.3 million. The Power Slap YouTube channel has racked up more than a billion views in roughly two years. And White has leveraged that audience to help Power Slap acquire sponsors such as Anheuser-Busch, Crypto.com, and Fanatics.

your freedom to do what two people want,” he says. “Look, people want to fight. We provide the platform to do it; we spend the money to make sure they’re safe and healthy. We make sure it’s as safe as possible.”

Compared with MMA or boxing, slap fighting also seems more accessible, since the athletes don’t need to be as perfectly toned or highly trained as MMA fighters. Quite a few are former football players, wrestlers, or martial artists. But many slappers are just dudes who work in a Dollar General warehouse in your town and have a love for slapping and being slapped, or at least for what they learn about themselves after eating a powerful smack and delivering one of their own.

With the violence comes the physical damage. A slap leaves a mark. Consider the face of Austin “Turp Daddy Slim” Turpin from Power Slap 7 after his victory over Wolverine, one of the best-known competitors in the sport. The left half of Turpin’s face has ballooned to twice the size of the right half. His cheek is bleeding. His eye is pressed closed. The damage is obvious, though it’s temporary. He’s smiling as a bead of sweat rolls down the center of his forehead.

meant that the raised stage was an octagon. Everyone was dressed up. (Even the media was given a dress code: business casual.) Lots of sharp-looking, moneyed dudes with their girlfriends and entourage who’d paid \$600 to \$1,200 per seat.

The first fight resulted in a knockout after two slaps. The crowd roared but clearly wanted more. The Power Slap undercard bouts consist of only three rounds (a coin toss determines who goes first, then you slap, and then you get slapped, and then repeat), which should tell you how hard these guys whack each other. The second match got to round 3 and ended in a knockout. The third was a fiesta of fouls resulting in disqualification.

The fourth match was one I was looking forward to. It featured a relatively unknown underdog, Anthony “Babyface” Blackburn, challenging the terrifyingly named Christopher “KO Chris” Thomas, one of the most public faces of Power Slap. KO Chris looked kinda mean, with neck tattoos, and had the name and record to prove it. But after taking one of KO Chris’s slaps, counted as a foul, Babyface knocked him out in round 2 with a righteous blow, much to everyone’s surprise.

A few days later, I talked with Babyface. A for-



Smiley, in yellow, lost by TKO in his bout against Mallet at SlapFIGHT 420.

“That’s
MY
BROTHER
UP
THERE.
I have to
*fight my
brother each
time.*”

mer wrestler and football player, he really does have a sweet face and demeanor by comparison with some of these guys. He said he had never been hit in the face before Power Slap and that he was outwardly a kind and helpful person. “I’m not confrontational at all,” he said, “but I’ve always been an angrier person and been able to turn that switch on.” For slap fighting, it helps to know “that burst of aggressive energy is just sitting inside of you.”

Just before his bout at Power Slap 7, Babyface had been let go from his job at a pizzeria outside Detroit, where he lives. To go from that disappointment to the thrill of knocking out a fellow slap fighter he idolized, like KO Chris, was almost too much for Babyface to process. “To be paid to do it, and be on a show, and do something really, really monumental like this, for this dream to happen and for it to come true, is like mind-boggling for me. Fucking awesome.” He described the slappers as a brotherhood and said he had Facebook Messenger groups with a lot of them. “We’re in each other’s lives every single day. That’s my brother up there. I have to fight my brother each time.”

Time for the main card, each fight featuring five rounds. An entertainingly obnoxious Ayjay “Static” Hintz beat Azael “El Perro” Rodriguez by technicality, with Rodriguez getting disqualified for an illegal strike that knocked out Hintz. Then, during the break, a commercial informed us that Power Slap 7 was brought to us by AminoHeal, “the official brain-protection supplement of Power Slap.” I tried to get AminoHeal to return my calls or send me a sample of its brain-protection product, which its website claims will “reduce and prevent the effects of mild concussions to severe traumatic brain injury,” but nobody got back to me.

Since we’re on the break, this is a good time to delve further into the rules, which both leagues told me are designed to protect the slappers. When Tilley created SFC in 2017, he embedded the league’s initials in its guidelines, which feature only three kinds of fouls: Stepping, in which the slapper’s feet lift off the ground in the windup or the follow-through to create more force in order to get an unfair advantage; Flinching, in which the slappee moves before impact to anticipate the blow and doesn’t allow their opponent to get a fair slap in; and Clubbing, which is any slap that initially connects with the neck or eye or ear, really anywhere other than the cheek and the chin, or doesn’t make full contact with the palm of the hand.

Power Slap’s rules are elaborations on SFC’s, laid out in considerably more detail. Tilley grouses that Power Slap’s adaptations, like a smaller barrier separating the combatants, make the slapping less safe, even though Power Slap

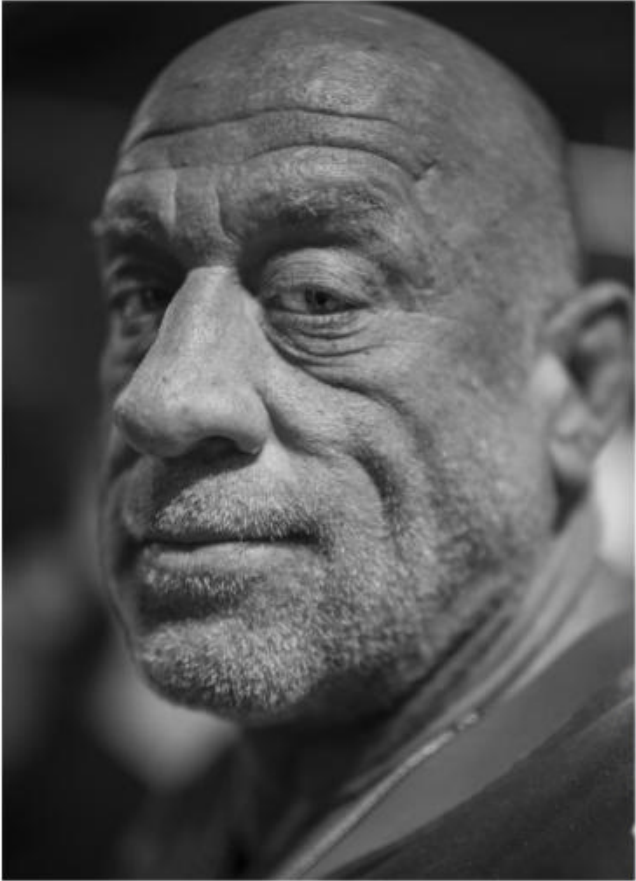
events involve fewer rounds than SFC’s. When I asked if Power Slap had taken the SFC rules as a model, a spokesperson gave me this answer: “We wrote the rules from scratch without any reference materials. We of course watched what was going on in other leagues, adopted certain things we liked, and changed things we didn’t like. We also professionalized the rules for government regulation purposes.”

Power Slap is still working on its rule enforcement and consistency, as White told us after the show. There were a lot of fouls called in Power Slap 7, and four of the eleven matches ended in disqualification. In spite of that, it was obvious why the sport is catching on so quickly. We’re in an age of making our sports shorter and faster paced: NHL hockey with its three-on-three overtimes and shoot-outs; Major League Baseball with its new pitch clocks and abbreviated extra innings; even football, with new clock rules to move things along at the end of a game. If you want people to pay attention to a sport in 2024, it has to be short and highlight filled, with plenty of time for commercial breaks.

The very last fight of Power Slap 7—the aforementioned showdown between Dibbell, a soft-spoken, 249-pound twenty-two-year-old who’s saving up his prize money to go to law school, and Phillips—pushed harder on the question of safety for me. Dibbell’s slap that knocked out Phillips in the fourth round was thrilling and disturbing in equal measure. Watching Phillips in the overhead shot on his back, opening and closing his mouth, clearly not all there, while the announcers chuckled about it (“down like a box of rocks, out like a light”) was not easy. He went down so fast that the beefy dudes whose job it was to catch a knocked-out fighter couldn’t get to him in time, and his head hit the canvas. As Dibbell was named the winner, flexed his victory on the stage, and eventually walked off for his post-match interview and we all left to try to get back to the pressroom, Phillips was still on the ground, being attended to by medical staff. He wouldn’t be available for the post-fight press conference. White said afterward that the knockout was in his “top two.”

AFTER VEGAS, THE VENUE IN OKLAHOMA City was underwhelming, as anything after Vegas should be. On the drive over, I passed three billboards advertising Oklahoma’s Largest Knife Show the following weekend before I rolled up to the site of the former Crossroads Mall, once “the premier shopping experience in Oklahoma,” according to KOKH Fox 25. It is now largely empty. Two local charter schools occupy the space that was origi-

THE FACES OF SLAPFIGHT 420—left to right, top to bottom: Smiley was competing in just his second slap-fighting event; Okuma 915 with his dog; Dangerous Danny Steele, a former pro wrestler, injured his biceps with a record slap; former UFC fighter Mark “the Hammer” Coleman, who does commentary on the live streams; Mallet relaxing pre-fight; police officers outside the venue; one of the women from Little Darlings; FPS and his girlfriend; Biscuit, the “slap-happy hippie.”



nally a Montgomery Ward. The north side, where I arrived, also advertised an antique show SATURDAY ONLY. Confused, I circled around the south side of the complex until I saw the signs for Chronic Palooza VI, a two-day festival celebrating the legalization of medical marijuana in Oklahoma.

Yes, the following day would be April 20, the high holy day for cannabis connoisseurs. And Tilley's league was holding SlapFIGHT 420, "the dankest event in SLAP history," as part of this promotion of all things weed. SFC mostly puts on underground shows for streaming audiences with tiny crowds in undisclosed locations. Tomorrow's event would have a larger live crowd, but true to SFC's underground brand, it would be in an abandoned Dillard's.

No one from SFC had yet arrived. Bass echoed through the cavernous space as dealers like Stristed Art (which made elaborate dragon sculptures out of bone), Paradise Vape, Permanent Jewelry ("ask us about our tooth gems"), Hawaii-CannabisExpo.com, and Little Darlings (a strip club just up the road) straggled in to set up their booths. I was so early, in fact, with so much time to kill that I felt obliged to go get a beer from the closest joint I could find, which was Little Dick's Halfway Inn, an extremely divey dive bar. It was busy at 4:30 on a Friday, and at this point I realized that you could still smoke (tobacco) in Oklahoma bars, which felt like going back in time twenty years—just in time to shop at the old Crossroads Dillard's.

The news was on: That's how I realized that today, April 19, was the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. Twenty-nine years ago, Timothy McVeigh killed at least 168 people in downtown OKC. It was a somber reminder: Where there are humans, there is violence. Was watching or engaging in slap fighting an outgrowth of

that violence or a solution to it? I didn't know, but Afroman was telling me to roll, roll, roll my joint. It was a jukebox song, I realized, maybe folks pre-gaming for Chronic Palooza or looking for some respite from history. There was little of that to be had. Choking on the smoke—not a good sign for my ability to report on a pot festival, I noted—I finished my canned beer quickly and drove back to the venue.

Inside, no one seemed concerned by my presence. So I went upstairs in search of slappers, which meant walking up the nonoperational former Dillard's escalator to the second floor, empty except for a bunch of dudes waiting for SFC's 6:00 P.M. weigh-in. Already the flavor of this weekend could not have been more different from Power Slap's: relaxed and very casual. There was no mention of a dress code.

Here I met Tilley, the SFC founder and CEO. A former wrestler, Motown singer, comedian, and Hall of Fame MMA promoter, he is a big, burly, likable guy who recently turned fifty. He has a promoter's jovial personality, a genuine smile, and an infectious enthusiasm for slap fighting and especially for the people who slap and get slapped. He is the face of SFC and, with retired MMA star Mark "the Hammer" Coleman, does the play-by-play on all the SFC live streams. From our first communication, he was super welcoming and described what they do as a family operation. That would come to be echoed by nearly every person involved with SFC. Tilley is a self-described inventor of "bullshit sports," as he told me with a laugh, like carjitsu, "jujitsu but inside of a car," a new sport for which he signed a deal with ESPN; ultimate tire wrestling, "a big stack of tractor tires, and your objective is to stuff the other guy inside the hole," also ESPN bound; beast ball, "one-on-one football in a shipping-container unit"; sumo boxing, which

I couldn't entirely figure out; and a new one he was developing where two guys get roped together as in the "Beat It" video and have to fight.

Tilley has complicated feelings about his Power Slap rivals. When Power Slap was starting, Tilley says that White & Co. called him and asked him to partner with them. He considered it but was unwilling to give up his league or have it subsumed by White's glitzier operation. He acknowledges that the growth of Power Slap is probably good for SFC, too, but he wants everyone to understand that he is the true slap-fighting pioneer. "I don't want to talk shit on anybody. But I'm also not going to pretend like I didn't write this sport on a piece of notebook paper on my coffee table."

Today at Dillard's, there was drama of a different nature: Tilley pulled me aside and told me that an official from the Oklahoma State Athletic Commission had come in earlier that day and forbidden him from putting on the event. He said he was planning to do it anyway, but there was a good chance he could get arrested. And if he did, he wanted to at least make sure we were there to get some photos. That's how much he was committed, he said, walking away to huddle up with a couple of the other production guys.

After a few minutes, he came back and told me he'd changed his mind and that he didn't want to endanger Chronic Palooza. The new plan was not to put on the show downstairs in front of the live audience tomorrow at 6:00 P.M. as intended but to do it secretly—no crowd, no announcements—and record it, then stream it later that night from "an undisclosed location," since at that point they couldn't stop the fight. He told me absolutely not to tell anyone; he would break the news to the slappers individually after the weigh-in. It was probably a coincidence, I told myself, that I'd mentioned to Power Slap's Frank Lamicella the



From left: Slap-Kage tends to his bloody nose; the Cannon and his brother, Runt, pose in their title belts after SlapFIGHT 420; JT Tilley, SlapFIGHT Championship founder and CEO, says he was inspired to "invent" the sport of slap fighting after he saw a viral video in 2015.

day before that I was going down to Oklahoma City for an SFC event.

On the docket were five bouts, assuming the event happened at all. The headline matchups were for titles. For the welterweight championship: Okuma 915, a tall, quiet guy from El Paso with a serious face, vs. the current champ, the Cannon. The Cannon's brother, Runt, would be slapping for the middleweight belt against challenger Shamokin Thunder Clap. The Cannon and Runt were both shorter than me but seriously jacked. They didn't say much.

The competitors who were not contending for a title were the big dudes, superheavyweights: an absolutely massive guy at six-foot-six and 342 pounds named Cowboy, who religiously wore, yes, a cowboy hat, against Dangerous Danny Steele, a former pro wrestler with the biggest arms I have ever seen. Steele had driven down with his crew from London, Ontario, to take part in this event.

The middleweight division would feature Slap-Kage, a talkative, anime-loving dude, vs. Biscuit, also known as the "slap-happy hippie," an extremely chill guy with a beanie he never took off and false teeth that he took out for each fight. In the catchweight division: Smiley, a kid with curly blond hair who could have been one of my undergraduate writing students, would be taking on Mallet, who had his name tattooed above his right eyebrow and told me he was the lightest slap fighter on the planet but had been trying to put on some weight so that Tilley could find him someone to fight. In lightweight: FPS, a tall, gangly dude with a goofy affect who liked playing, you guessed it, first-person-shooter games, would slap against Wildman, a bearded, intense guy who looked a solid foot shorter than him.

These guys were characters, to say the least. Several had backgrounds in other combat sports or martial arts; some had military backgrounds. Some had just seen slap fighting and thought they might be good at it. Mallet told me he'd just lost his dad a year ago and had a lot of anger he was working through, and he was really glad he found slap fighting because otherwise, he said, he would probably be in jail. Having experienced a significant personal tragedy would be part of many guys' answers to one of the obvious questions: Why did you sign up to get smacked this hard in the face? Shamokin Thunder Clap, the best dressed of the bunch in a bow tie and a leather cap, had lost an infant son to Covid, then lost a long-term relationship, and on top of that he had just got through prostate cancer, so the brutality of slapping and getting slapped didn't seem so bad to him. In fact, he liked the pain, he told me. He'd spent a lot of time street fighting before he found his way here. He would be aiming for a belt tomorrow.



The face of Austin "Turp Daddy Slim" Turpin before and after his victory over Wolverine at Power Slap 7 in Las Vegas.

Smiley told me the event was his second slap fight ever. He got into the sport because of Biscuit. He and Biscuit work together in a Dollar General warehouse in Fulton, Missouri. Smiley trains at the gym some nights and with Biscuit every Monday to work on slap-fighting technique. In his free time he hangs out with his girlfriend and plays Magic the Gathering, because he doesn't drink. Slap fighting, he said, has changed him for the better and given him a good way to release bad energy. "It's like a form of therapy."

There were reasons to root for all of the fighters, and the more I got to know them, the more I liked them. I was starting to see the appeal of slapping and being slapped—how when you realized you could take it, as one of them told me, it gave you a sense that you could take more than you thought you could, and then you got to give it right back out. In SFC, most of these guys were friends—family, as Tilley would have said—and the love between them was obvious.

Tony Charles and the team from TNT Premier Sports were setting up a device called the PowerKube that was, he said, designed to measure the force of a blow. They've been measuring MMA fighters and boxers and martial artists for years, he explained, and one of the reasons they chose to come down here was that he has a lot of respect for SFC and wanted to give its slappers the first shot at setting the Guinness World Record for the strongest slap. He Velcroed the target, a cube sixteen inches on each side with a bull's-eye on the front of it, to an iron beam so that each guy could take a shot at it. Naturally everyone was eager to see what kind of number they could post. A Guinness World Record would be set tonight, and the videos of each of the guys slapping the Kube would be rolled into their introduction reel tomorrow. I watched for a while as they took their best shots.

Slapping force, Tilley told me, isn't really what makes you a great slap fighter. What you want is to hit the right spot, not necessarily to smash the face with your power. There's a nerve behind

the mandible, and if you hit the right spot and slide the mandible back in, it connects with that nerve and slides out and your opponent goes down. I noticed this, too, watching both Power Slap 7 and SlapFIGHT 420: Being big didn't necessarily help. In fact, almost all the tall fighters I saw facing more compact opponents lost. Many of the fighters had clearly been practicing a slap technique that started low and went up into the face and chin, and it appeared to be very effective.

The second reason they brought the PowerKube in, Tilley would tell me later, was that he wanted to quantify just how relatively safe

slapping was in contrast to punching or kicking. That would be borne out by the numbers, in which the hardest slap of the night—unsurprisingly by Dangerous Danny Steele—and thus the world record, was 75,906 Franklins. I had to read a Reddit thread to understand just what this proprietary measure actually measures, which is some combination of power, speed, and energy. Whatever the exact formula is, Steele's record slap was less than half as powerful as the hardest punch (191,796 Franklins) or the hardest kick (235,875 Franklins) they had recorded. That gave at least some credence to the arguments about relative safety that both SFC and Power Slap were making. Plus, as Babyface told me later, any kind of slap that generated world-record-level force, as Steele's did, would be a foul, so the record-setting slaps aren't anything like what you'd get in a match.

Charles asked me if I wanted to try, but I demurred, figuring my arm would fall off and I'd die of blood loss and shame. As I was nursing my insecurity, I overheard Cowboy saying that Steele had ripped his biceps while hitting the Kube and would not be able to compete tomorrow. Tilley was trying to find another opponent to fill in so that Cowboy would have someone to fight, but there are only so many giant guys who are willing to stand on a stage and take a slap on short notice, even in Oklahoma.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, TILLEY TEXTED to tell me they'd decided to call the Athletic Commission's bluff and run the event as planned onstage with a live audience. When I arrived, Chronic Palooza was now in full force. The haze of pot smoke would get thicker and thicker throughout the day until by evening it resembled a stew. Rappers worked the stage. An extremely stoned and very wizardly dude from Dragon Group Entertainment's Build-a-Bong Workshop beckoned folks with his wizard staff, which was also, obviously, a bong. The number of kids in

SMACKED UPSIDE THE HEAD

attendance was vaguely disturbing, but the organizers had clearly planned for it, with opportunities to pet two small cows for two dollars and a dicey-looking inflatable ball pit.

I didn't want to build a bong, but I did want the Donut Burger from Miss Tammy's Lunch Wagon: a fresh burger served with a glazed doughnut for a bun. Miss Tammy had just started up this business six months ago, she told me as she cooked. All four ladies working the truck were lunch ladies at local schools, which I found extremely charming. I have to say the Donut Burger kicked ass. It was tasty and messy in a novel way. Both doughnut and burger were fresh and delicious, and together they felt absolutely over-the-top. The yellow mustard really worked with the glaze, which is a sentence I never thought I would write. It was a lot, but I was here to watch men slapping each other in the face, so I felt like I needed to eat it for science. For health, I skipped the fries.

BOTH SFC AND POWER SLAP TOLD ME THEY thought their event was safer than the other's. Power Slap touted its relatively few rounds (three and five rounds for prelims and main events, compared with seven and ten rounds for SFC) and its top-notch commitment to medical protection and care. Meanwhile, SFC cited the close nature of the relationships among its slappers and argued that, unlike the Power Slap guys, SFC's slappers don't lead with the base of the hand, which makes a slap much more like a punch. Tilley and his team claimed their slappers were more scrupulous about the rules. And they, too, had a medical professional backstage who checked out everyone after the fights. To my eyes, both events featured dudes getting crushed in the face.

In Oklahoma City, though, I did get to witness the camaraderie among the SFC competitors that Tilley was touting. Whether it was Biscuit telling his opponent, "You got this" while preparing to eat said opponent's thunderous slap, or whether it was Mallet and Smiley hanging out in their hotel room before their fight, again in the greenroom, and then afterward in the crowd watching the title match, I came to really believe in the friendships between them.

As we approached showtime, it looked like this event might really happen.

Now the Little Darlings were done up like actual showgirls, feathered headpieces and all, which I found delightfully upscale. The ladies shared the greenroom with the slap fighters, walled off between the up and down nonfunctional escalators to the second floor. More than once I'd see what I thought was blood on a table only to realize it was (probably) red makeup. I walked upstairs, and finding two people there having a private conversation, I continued up to the empty third floor, where I

happened on a whole pile of figures in the dark, some standing, some sitting. When I clicked on my phone's light, I was shocked to see a white-faced clown with a cleaver. Pan right to an evil jester. A freaky woman with long blond hair. And maybe worst of all, an unidentifiable figure with a bunch of what looked like hangers for a face. I wondered how much of that smoke I had inhaled before I realized it was a huge pile of Halloween decorations stuck up here between seasons. HE'S HERE was spray-painted on the wall. I went back downstairs as quickly as I could.

I was excited for the show, but I wasn't excited for the show. Now that I'd met these guys—mostly sweet and chill, here for their own reasons—I honestly didn't want to see them hit each other in the face, even if they did. But I wasn't here for the burger or the clowns. And besides—the evil clown might have told me, if it didn't kill me—the show must go on, unless it got shut down by the Athletic Commission.

It didn't. A few minutes after 6:00, a big crowd of mostly but not entirely stoned folks gathered around the main stage, and the show went live.

This was also a production, if not quite at the level of the Power Slap experience. A small crowd rounded out the stage, standing behind the slappers. The crowd chanted *one, two, three* for every slap, which felt inclusive. Wildman beat FPS on judges' decision. Mallet TKO'd Smiley. Biscuit outlasted SlapKage for the win. Runt TKO'd Shamokin Thunder Clap in the third round to retain his belt. Unfortunately they couldn't find a big enough opponent on short notice for Cowboy. And the main event, Okuma 915 vs. the Cannon for the welterweight championship, lived up to its billing, going an incredible ten face-slapping rounds. Both these dudes ate every slap and gave each back, their faces reddening and swelling, and at the end, the judges' decision went to the Cannon, who retained the belt.

And with that, the event was over.

My adrenaline was running high, and I was just watching. I couldn't imagine how the slappers felt afterward. SlapKage told me that there's just a feeling, that fight-or-flight instinct kicking in after you take a massive slap in the face, and when you're able to master it—if you're able to master it—and compose yourself to give it back to your opponent, that feeling is hard to give up. Mallet talked about what it's like when you go back to your day job with your face all lit up with battle scars. And then you have to explain to your coworkers that you spent the weekend getting hit in the face and maybe getting "knocked the fuck out," as Smiley said happily. People just look at you like you're crazy—*Why would you do that?!*—but they'll never know. And there's a letdown, I suppose, after the adrenaline subsides. There always is. What you have left over, after that goes away, is the story and the memory of it that only you can know. ■

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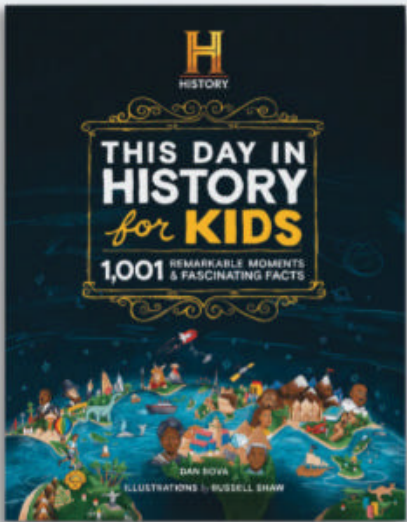


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Second Dinners

“SO, WHAT ARE WE THINKING?” THE WAITER ASKS. YOU look across the table to your date and run through the possibilities. It’s time to choose what you’re eating tonight—a little game we play every 24 hours. Leaving this situation with all parties satisfied is one of the greatest skills a person can acquire. It’s a difficult dance, even when it’s just normal dinner. But you are not here for normal dinner. You are hiding a secret that no one else in the restaurant knows. . . . This is second dinner.

It wasn’t the first dinner’s fault you’ve found yourself here. Maybe dinner number one was elegant French cuisine but you forgot you have an American stomach. Maybe you were a party of four and all the shared dishes came in pieces of three. Restaurants are weird like that. Hell, maybe you just didn’t want to break the bank at an expensive joint with light fare. All you know for sure this evening is that you’re *still* hungry and it’s time for second dinner.

Taco Bell’s Nacho Cheese Doritos Locos Tacos were certainly invented with the need for second dinner in mind. So was wrapping finger food in bacon, and the entire enterprise of opening a bar that keeps the stove burning late. When you turn to your date and suggest a second dinner, the world is your oyster. *Mmm . . . oysters.*

The beauty of second dinner is that it can take as many forms as there are people on planet earth. The only requirement of second dinner is that it happen in a location distinct from the first. You don’t get to order another plate of pasta for the table and call it second dinner. That’s just *more* dinner. Nothing wrong with it, but second dinner it is not, and second dinner is even better. We endorse it.

Second dinner is a pizza topped with the works after a night

on the town. It’s food you didn’t even know came fried, drunk-ly ordered with the rising sun. Second dinner is the Kraft Mac & Cheese you crave in solitude after you’ve exhausted your social battery. Sometimes it’s the leftovers from the dinner you ate a couple hours ago. Feeling fancy? Second dinner is branzino tonight. On occasion, we’ve even ordered takeout for two people knowing that we’re going to eat the second meal later. Don’t judge us! It’s called meal prep. Second dinner is what happens when “I’ll just have a little bite” turns into an empty fridge.

How gluttonous, you may be thinking, how utterly American. But no! Second dinner is an internationally beloved pastime. Spain practically invented the thing. Ever had tapas? It’s not just the small, shareable sizes that make tapas all about eating *until day-break*. The country’s dining culture is designed for barhopping, grabbing a little bite from each new spot, and moving on to the next. And why stop at second dinner? When in Madrid, why not have three, four, or even five tiny meals within the same night?

We can tell you’re going, “Hold on a second. You can’t have it all! There are rules! You simply cannot surf ’n’ turf and then turf ’n’ surf. We are men, not beasts.” Friend, liberate yourself. We once watched in horror as a guy on YouTube prepared a midnight meal he called “chili eggs.” This maniac of a chef put a mound of chili and guacamole on top of eight scrambled eggs. Eight! You don’t cook something like chili eggs while thinking about the rules. You are Prometheus, stealing fire, bending reality to your will. The other term for this is “being a grown-up.” There are no meal police. There is no dinner jail. You can eat dinner *again*. With second dinner, the world is not just your oyster. The world is several oysters at several different restaurants. ■



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